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New York

President:	Mr. Van Oosterom	(Netherlands)
Members:	Bolivia (Plurinational State of)	Mr. Inchauste Jordán
	China	Mr. Wu Haitao
	Côte d'Ivoire	Mr. Dah
	Equatorial Guinea	Mr. Ndong Mba
	Ethiopia	Mr. Alemu
	France	Mr. Delattre
	Kazakhstan	Mr. Temenov
	Kuwait	Mr. Alotaibi
	Peru	Mr. Meza-Cuadra
	Poland	Ms. Wronecka
	Russian Federation	Mr. Safronkov
	Sweden	Mr. Orrenius Skau
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Ms. Pierce
	United States of America	Mr. Miller

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

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The meeting was called to order at 10.05 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

The President: In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite Mr. Nickolay Mladenov, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General, to participate in this meeting.

Mr. Mladenov is joining today's meeting via video-teleconference from Jerusalem.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

Recalling the Security Council's latest note 507 on its working methods (S/2017/507), I wish to encourage all participants, both members and non-members of the Council, to deliver their statements in five minutes or less. Note 507 also encourages briefers to be succinct and to focus on key issues. Briefers are further encouraged to limit initial remarks to agreed time limits.

I now give the floor to Mr. Mladenov.

Mr. Mladenov: On behalf of the Secretary-General, I devote my regular briefing on the situation in the Middle East today to introducing the fifth report on the implementation of resolution 2334 (2016), covering the period from 18 December 2017 to 25 March 2018. I will focus on the developments on the ground in accordance with the provisions of the resolution, including on the regional and international efforts to advance the peace process.

Let me reiterate from the outset that developments on the ground cannot be divorced from the broader context of continued military occupation of Palestinian territory, uncertainties about the future of the peace process and the two-State solution, unilateral actions that undermine peace efforts, and continued turmoil in the wider region.

Allow me to also express my continued concern over the $446-million funding gap for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). It must be bridged urgently to ensure that UNRWA can provide basic services to Palestine refugees, including to school half a million children across the Middle East, until a just and lasting peace is achieved. I welcome the approximately $100 million pledged at the recent Extraordinary Ministerial Conference in Rome. I encourage Member States to consider urgently providing additional new funding for UNRWA's critical work.

In its paragraph 2, resolution 2334 (2016) calls on Israel to "immediately and completely cease all settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem" and to fully respect all its legal obligations in this regard. No such steps were taken during the reporting period. I reiterate that the United Nations considers all settlement activities to be a violation of international law and a major obstacle to peace.

Israel advanced 22 plans for some 1,500 housing units in Area C settlements. Around a dozen units were approved for construction — significantly lower than the 1,200 units approved during the previous three-month period. Ten tenders for some 900 housing units in seven Area C settlements were also announced. Official figures released last week show that construction starts in Area C settlements declined in 2017 to nearly half the number of 2016, which was the highest in over a decade. The plans include 15 temporary housing units near Gush Etzion, south of Bethlehem, in an area outside the jurisdiction of nearby settlements. These units are planned for residents of the Netiv Ha'avot outpost whose homes are slated for demolition on 15 June.

In response to the January shooting attack that killed a rabbi from the Havat Gilad outpost, on 4 February the Israeli Government approved the establishment of a new settlement to absorb its residents. Havat Gilad is built almost entirely on privately owned Palestinian land.

In related potentially significant legislative developments, in January the Knesset passed an amendment to the Basic Law on Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. By requiring a super-majority of 80 votes in the Knesset, the change will make it more difficult for Israel to transfer territories that are currently within the Israeli-defined Jerusalem municipality boundaries to a future Palestinian State. Conversely, it also makes it somewhat easier to change those municipal boundaries, by lowering the previously required Knesset threshold to a simple majority. On 7 March, the Knesset also approved an amendment to Israel's law on entry to Israel, allowing the revocation of the permanent

residency status of Palestinians in East Jerusalem who are involved in terrorist activities, treason or espionage, as defined in Israeli law. On 25 February, the Government endorsed a bill transferring jurisdiction over certain categories of petitions related to decisions by Israeli authorities in the West Bank from the High Court of Justice to the Court for Administrative Affairs in Jerusalem. The bill's sponsors have described it as a step towards equating legal procedures and norms in the West Bank and Israel.

The Israeli authorities have continued to demolish Palestinian-owned structures across the occupied West Bank, including in East Jerusalem, albeit at last year's relatively low rate. Ninety-two structures, including 15 that were donor-funded, were demolished, for reasons that included a lack of building permits, which are nearly impossible for Palestinians to obtain. As a result, 104 Palestinians, including 42 children, were displaced, affecting the livelihoods of more than 360 people. The demolition of two donor-funded classrooms serving 26 children in the Palestinian Bedouin community of Abu Nuwar was particularly worrying. For at least three years now, the United Nations has been warning that Israel has been putting steady pressure on Abu Nuwar residents to move. The community is in the strategic E-1 area planned for the expansion of Ma'ale Adumim, which would result in the creation of a continuous built-up area between the settlement and East Jerusalem, further dividing East Jerusalem from the rest of the West Bank.

Similarly, on 21 March the Bedouin village of Umm Al-Hiran also came under renewed threat as Israeli authorities posted eviction notices on homes indicating that evictions could take place at any time between 14 and 29 April. In late December, in the Masafer Yatta area of Hebron, where there are demolition orders on most structures, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) blocked several access routes and issued a military order requiring Palestinians to obtain permits to cross, limiting access to services and livelihoods for some 1,400 residents in 12 communities.

Turning to the persistent problem of violence, the reporting period was characterized by continuing demonstrations and clashes following the announcement on 6 December in which the United States recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital, and the growing tensions in the West Bank, including in East Jerusalem and along the Gaza fence. Israeli security forces killed 23 Palestinians, including six children, in various incidents, including reported attacks against Israelis, demonstrations, clashes and military operations in the occupied Palestinian territory. Five Israelis — three civilians and two soldiers — were killed by Palestinians in separate attacks in the West Bank, including in East Jerusalem. On 5 February, a resident of the Har Bracha settlement was stabbed to death at the entrance to the Ariel settlement. On 9 January, a rabbi from the Havat Gilad outpost was killed in a drive-by shooting. Two of the three alleged perpetrators were killed by Israeli security forces during subsequent search-and-arrest operations. On 18 March, an Israeli civilian was stabbed to death in Jerusalem's Old City. The alleged assailant, a Palestinian man from the West Bank town of Aqraba, was shot dead by Israeli security forces. On 10 March, a Palestinian teenager was shot dead during clashes with Israeli security forces and settlers in the village of Urif, after confrontations turned violent between Palestinian villagers and residents of the nearby Yitzhar settlement.

During the reporting period, there was a worrying escalation of violence in and around the Gaza Strip. Improvised explosive devices placed near the Gaza fence by Palestinian militants exploded on three occasions, wounding four Israeli soldiers in one incident on 17 February. On each occasion, Israeli forces responded with air strikes and shelling against Hamas targets. The Israeli military also announced that it had destroyed three tunnels either fully inside Gaza or leading from Gaza into Israeli territory. On 13 January, before the escalation, the IDF also destroyed a tunnel extending from Gaza into Israel and Egypt under the Kerem Shalom crossing. In addition, 33 rockets were fired from Gaza towards Israel, of which 11 landed in Israel itself. The IDF retaliated against Hamas military sites in Gaza. No injuries were reported on either side.

On 13 March, an improvised explosive device targeting the convoy of Palestinian Prime Minister Hamdallah and the Head of Palestinian General Intelligence exploded in Gaza, with minor injuries to six people. No one has claimed responsibility for that so far. On 22 March, Hamas security forces conducted an operation in the Nuseirat camp in Gaza, reportedly targeting the chief suspect in the bombing of the Prime Minister's convoy. During the operation, the suspect and an accomplice were critically wounded and later succumbed to their wounds. Two members of Hamas's security forces were also killed during the incident.

Despite the call in Security Council resolution 2334 (2016) for the parties to refrain from acts of

provocation, incitement and inflammatory rhetoric, such statements have continued. Fatah's official social-media pages continued to feature posts glorifying the perpetrators of past violence against Israeli civilians, including terror attacks that killed civilians and children. In addition, Palestinian officials continued to make statements denying the historical and religious connection of Jews to Jerusalem and its holy sites. One senior religious leader made the false claim that Jews had lived in historical Jerusalem for only 70 or 80 years. Others continue to describe Israel as a colonial project. I urge the Palestinian leadership to continue to speak out against violence in general and to condemn specific attacks against civilians. Senior Israeli officials also made provocative statements encouraging annexation of all or parts of the occupied West Bank and categorically rejecting the notion of a two-State solution. Some claimed that Palestinians are an invented people; others referred to Palestinians as bloodthirsty barbarians; and one political leader called for more injuries and deaths in Gaza, complaining that Israeli military strikes responding to rocket fire were not producing enough casualties among militants. I urge political leaders to refrain from provocative statements and actions that fuel an already tense environment.

Resolution 2334 (2016) reiterated the calls by the Middle East Quartet for affirmative steps to be taken to reverse negative trends on the ground that are imperilling a two-State solution. The period has witnessed both positive and negative actions by the parties in that regard. In January, after years of negotiations, Israel approved the operation of local Palestinian 3G service in the West Bank, allowing Palestinian telecommunications companies to offer higher speed data services and somewhat improve their competitiveness.

There were two high-level meetings, in Paris on 15 February between the Israeli and Palestinian Ministers of Economy, and on 19 February in Ramallah between the Israeli Minister of Finance and the Palestinian Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, aimed at discussing a range of economic and infrastructure issues concerning the West Bank and Gaza. On 18 February, Israel's Ministerial Committee for Legislation endorsed a bill that would allow Israel to withhold tax revenues that are collected by Israel on behalf of the Palestinian Authority. The amount withheld would be equivalent to the money used for payments to the families of Palestinian perpetrators of attacks on Israelis or for prisoners held in Israeli jails. On 5 March, the Knesset advanced a more restrictive version of the same bill.

Meanwhile, implementation of the intra-Palestinian agreement of 12 October between Fatah and Hamas has stalled. In February and March, Egypt hosted delegations from the two parties in an effort to advance the process of returning Gaza to the control of the Palestinian Authority. I also held multiple meetings with senior Palestinian and Egyptian officials in support of that process.

On 4 March, the Palestinian Government approved a $5.1 billion budget for 2018, while presenting the option that if it were empowered in Gaza, it could amend the budget and absorb up to 20,000 Gaza civil servants as well.

In Gaza, the electricity supply remains far below people's needs, with power cuts of up to 20 hours per day. Without emergency fuel, 55 sewage pools are at a significant risk of overflowing and the functioning of 48 water desalination plants has been reduced to around 20 per cent of their working capacity. Water is piped to households for only a few hours a day, every four or five days. Basic services continue to function thanks to United Nations-distributed, donor-funded fuel for generators, which is expected to last, at best, only until September. Over 40 per cent of essential medicines remain at zero stock due to the lack of funding.

After a 10-year delay, the Northern Gaza Emergency Sewage Treatment project finally began operating on 1 March, albeit at minimum capacity. More sustainable energy supply and other infrastructure projects need to be urgently pursued in order to allow it to function at full capacity.

In addition to a rapidly deteriorating humanitarian situation, Gaza's economy remains on the brink of collapse. Urgent interventions, alongside increased commitment to short-, medium- and long-term projects, provided the basis for discussions at the meeting of the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee for the Coordination of International Assistance to Palestinians on 20 March in Brussels. Two preparatory meetings — one in Cairo and the other in Washington, D.C., respectively — helped develop a series of priority engagements aimed at improving the electricity, water and health situations in Gaza.

A European Union (EU)-hosted pledging conference for the Gaza Central Desalination Plant, which also took place on 20 March, saw Member States commit some $565 million — nearly 80 per cent of the project's costs — thereby enabling the tendering process to begin. That is a positive development for the people and infrastructure of Gaza. Nevertheless, it is only one, albeit important project required to ensure that Gaza remains livable beyond the foreseeable future.

In a welcome development, over the past two months, Israel has approved thousands of pending residential cases, more than 130 private-sector projects and over 1,200 requests for the import of items that Israel considers to be of dual civilian and military use. On 14 February, at a trilateral meeting convened by the United Nations, Israel and the Palestinian Authority agreed to continue with the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism and conduct a joint review in order to improve the functionality, transparency and predictability of the Mechanism.

Resolution 2334 (2016) calls upon all States to distinguish in their relevant dealings between the territory of the State of Israel and the territories occupied since 1967. There are two developments to report in that regard. On 23 January, the Danish Parliament passed a resolution with reference to resolution 2334 (2016), and in line with European Union policy, urging that future agreements between Denmark and Israel clearly state their inapplicability to occupied territory and encouraging the Government to strengthen its guidance to private and public investors.

Also in January, the European Commission signed a financing agreement with Israel, allowing the latter's participation in the Joint Operational Programme of the Mediterranean Sea Basin Programme under the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument for 2014-2020. In continuation of an existing EU practice, the agreement includes a territorial clause stating that

> "[i]n accordance with EU policy, the agreement shall not apply to the geographic areas that came under the administration of the State of Israel after 5 June 1967".

Regrettably, the reporting period saw no progress towards advancing the goal of a lasting peace, as also called for in the resolution.

On 31 January, Norway and the European Union convened an extraordinary meeting of the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee, in which support for the two-State solution, in line with relevant United Nations resolutions, was reiterated. The participants stated their support for ongoing efforts to restore unity between the West Bank and Gaza under the control of the legitimate Palestinian Authority, by focusing, inter alia, on urgent projects that address pressing electricity, water and humanitarian needs.

Speaking before the Security Council on 20 February (see S/PV.8183), Palestinian President Abbas called for an international peace conference to be held by the middle of the year to form a multilateral mechanism in support of the parties to negotiate all permanent-status issues within a specific time frame and secure full United Nations membership for the State of Palestine and mutual recognition of Palestinian and Israeli statehood on the 1967 lines. On 23 February, the United States announced that it would move its embassy to Jerusalem on 14 May, which will coincide with the seventieth anniversary of Israel's declaration of independence.

In closing, I would like to share some broad observations concerning the provisions of the resolution on the reporting period.

First, Israel's illegal settlement expansion and related activities continue to further threaten the viability of the two-State solution and erode the prospects for peace. The latest decision to establish a new settlement — for the second time since the adoption of resolution 2334 (2016), following Amihai in May 2017 — is particularly troubling. Meanwhile, Palestinian development remains extremely restricted. In Area C alone, there are nearly 13,000 outstanding demolition orders against Palestinian-owned structures, of which some 500 are ready for execution. Less than 1 per cent of Area C, comprising over 60 per cent of the West Bank and critical to the contiguity of a future Palestinian State, is available for Palestinian construction under approved plans.

Secondly, violence and incitement continue to fuel hatred, division, distrust and fear. Continuing terror attacks on Israelis and the attempt on the life of the Palestinian Prime Minister illustrate the growing risk of destabilization and the empowerment of radicals and extremists. The use of force by Israel must also be calibrated. Israel must uphold its responsibilities

under international human rights and humanitarian law. Lethal force should be used only as a last resort, with any resulting fatalities properly investigated by the authorities. I once again urge the security forces to exercise maximum restraint in order to avoid casualties.

I note the developing Palestinian plans for a march on the Gaza fence on 30 March. I call on all sides to exercise restraint and to take the necessary steps to avoid a violent escalation. It is imperative that civilians, in particular children, not be targeted and that all actors refrain from putting children at risk at any time. I also take this opportunity to reiterate my call on Hamas to provide full information on the two Israeli soldiers and two civilians who are being held in Gaza, as required by international humanitarian law.

Thirdly, steps taken on the ground in Area C and Gaza are welcome, but far from transformative. The relaxation on the import of certain dual-use items and the increased number of permits issued to business people in Gaza are nevertheless important developments that need to be sustained and augmented. Economic development, critical as it is, is no substitute for sovereignty and statehood. Efforts aimed at achieving both must proceed in parallel.

Fourthly, the terrorist attack against the convoy of Prime Minister Hamdallah in Gaza was a serious attempt to derail the Cairo process and its perpetrators must be brought to justice. In that respect, I call on Palestinian factions to engage earnestly with Egypt and move forward on the implementation of the Cairo agreement. That includes the paying of salaries for civil servants and the full empowerment of the Government in Gaza. A fully empowered Palestinian Authority in Gaza remains key to lifting the closures, alleviating the humanitarian and development crisis in Gaza, and furthering national aspirations for statehood.

I commend the Prime Minister's commitment to continuing his efforts towards reconciliation and commend Egypt for its tireless efforts in that regard. The United Nations remains committed to supporting Egyptian efforts to advance the process and welcomes the efforts of the international community for a more coordinated engagement in alleviating the humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

I note with concern, however, that reports have emerged today, indicating that Hamas has set up a checkpoint at the Erez, or Beit Hanoun, crossing, which controls the entrance of national and international personnel into Gaza and the exit of all Gaza identification holders. As per the intra-Palestinian agreement of 12 October, all checkpoints should be handed over to the Palestinian Authority.

Fifthly, I remain greatly concerned by the state of our collective efforts to advance peace. Long-held international consensus positions on final status issues, including on Jerusalem and refugees, and United Nations principles must remain the guiding framework of a negotiated process towards the ultimate goal of a two-State solution. Any deviation from those principles would be dangerous. Resolution 2334 (2016) states in paragraph 3 that the Security Council

> "will not recognize any changes to the 4 June 1967 lines, including with regard to Jerusalem, other than those agreed by the parties through negotiations".

All final-status issues should be resolved on the basis of relevant United Nations resolutions, bilateral agreements and international law.

As the Secretary-General has repeatedly reminded the Council, the United Nations strongly urges Israelis, Palestinians and the international community to take concrete measures that will reverse the current course of the conflict and advance the goal of a just and sustainable peace, based on the two-State solution. Generations of Palestinian and Israeli lives have been shaped by the conflict. It is time to begin building a different future, based on mutual respect, dignity and the belief that even the deepest and most painful divisions can be resolved if there is a genuine desire for change.

The President: I thank Mr. Mladenov for his briefing.

Before giving the floor to Council members, I should like to highlight the presence in the Chamber of the new Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom to the United Nations, Ambassador Karen Pierce, and, on behalf of all members of the Council, to extend a warm welcome to her.

I shall now give the floor to those members of the Council who wish to make statements.

Mr. Ndong Mba (Equatorial Guinea) (*spoke in Spanish*): At the outset, I would like to welcome Ms. Karen Pierce as the new Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom to the United Nations. We wish her great success in her post and would like to

affirm that she can count on the same full support and cooperation that we extended to her predecessor. We welcome her to New York.

I would like to express our gratitude and recognition to Mr. Nickolay Mladenov, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General to the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Palestinian Authority, who provided us with a very complete, clear and detailed briefing on the current situation in the Middle East, which focused on the implementation of resolution 2334 (2016), on the Palestinian question.

Aware of the intensity and the extent of the destruction of the current conflicts in the Middle East, for which we desire a prompt resolution, the Republic of Equatorial Guinea would like to point out that, since it was first put on the agenda of the General Assembly in April 1947 to the present time, the Palestinian question has not ceased to be at the heart of the instability of the region due to its historical complications and implications, its longevity and, in particular, a lack of proper implementation of resolutions adopted by the Security Council in that regard.

Resolution 2334 (2016) reiterates the appeal of the Quartet for Middle East peace to both parties involved in the conflict to adopt measures to reverse the negative trend on the ground, which jeopardizes the solution of two independent States — one Israeli and the other Palestinian — called on to live together in mutual cooperation and compelled to guarantee sustainable peace and security for the two States and for other parties in the region. However, some developments on the ground seek to put that objective far beyond our reach.

Equatorial Guinea believes the historic claims of the Palestinians to be just, in line with the various declarations of the African Union. We also believe that Israel has the right to live in peace and security. The Israelis should recognize that just as Israel's right to exist cannot be denied, nor can that of Palestine. Violent behaviour should cease once and for all and each party should fulfil its international obligations as set out in the various United Nations resolutions in general. The parties should refrain from unilateral actions that could hinder the return to negotiations.

The reunification of Palestine under a single, legitimate and democratic Government is also key to envisaging the aspirations of the Palestinian people as one, which would in part facilitate the mediation role of the Security Council. We therefore welcome the reconciliation agreement between Fatah and Hamas, signed in Cairo in October of last year, as well as the return of the Palestinian Authority to the Gaza Strip to resume its control.

Now more than ever, the Security Council and the entire international community must remain united in their desire to see a peaceful solution to all aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Only in that way can we bring due pressure to bear on the Israeli and Palestinian authorities to stop the trends that threaten the process and ask them to be adequately flexible and reasonable in understanding once and for all that peace is a much more valuable goal than the violence, hate and injustice that have characterized the region for more than half a century.

I would like to conclude my statement by expressing the strong desire of the Government of the Republic of Equatorial Guinea to see the current initiatives for a peace plan of the Government of the United States result in a tangible peace plan that is acceptable to all parties involved in the conflict and thereby to bring about peace among the Israelis and Palentinians, which is so desired.

Mr. Inchauste Jordán (Plurinational State of Bolivia) (*spoke in Spanish*): We join the Permanent Representative of Equatorial Guinea in welcoming the new Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom. We wish her every success in her new post. We would also like to thank Special Coordinator Nickolay Mladenov for his briefing.

The Plurinational State of Bolivia attends this meeting on the first quarterly report of 2018 on the implementation of resolution 2334 (2016), which mentions the illegality of Israeli settlements in the Palestinian territories, including East Jerusalem. As on previous occasions, the situation on the ground is discouraging. The evident breach by the occupying Power, Israel, of the resolution in clear violation of international law and the more than 700 General Assembly resolutions adopted since 1948 and the 86 Security Council resolutions is a source of concern.

According to the declaration of the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, on 4 February, his Government has decided to build 350 new housing units in the settlement of Netiv Ha'avot, which is located south of the city of Bethlehem in the occupied West

Bank. Such a decision violates resolution 2334 (2016) and the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, which affirms, among other things, the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by force, as well as the right of people to self-determination. It moves us further from the possibility of a two-State solution.

For that reason, we reiterate our full commitment to resolution 2334 (2016), on the illegality of the Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories. We once again call for the quarterly report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of the resolution to be in written format, which would allow us to know about its implementation in detail, and for the presentation of updated maps of all settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories. In that connection, Bolivia calls on contributors to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East to continue to provide their invaluable support of humanitarian assistance to more than 1 million people in Gaza and, in general, to the approximately 5 million Palestinian refugees in countries in the region.

Bolivia calls for intra-Palestinian unity and for a strengthened presence of the Palestinian Authority in the Gaza Strip. In that regard, we strongly condemn the attack on the head of the Palestinian Government, Mr. Rami Hamdallah, on 13 March during his visit to the region. We condemn all forms of terrorism, whatever their origin, and we consider all imposition of ideas through force and violence to be unacceptable.

We express our firm commitment to all international efforts seeking a peaceful resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In that regard, we support such initiatives as the Quartet road map, the Madrid principles, the Arab Peace Initiative and others that seek to ensure a just, lasting peace that will allow both peoples to live within recognized and secure borders. Bolivia is convinced that the only long-term option for the resolution of the conflict is the two-State solution, in which we finally see the establishment of a free, sovereign and independent Palestine with pre-1967 international borders and east Jerusalem as its capital, in accordance with relevant resolutions of the Security Council and the General Assembly.

Mr. Dah (Côte d'Ivoire) (*spoke in French*): My delegation thanks Mr. Nickolay Mladenov, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, for his quarterly report on the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question. My delegation also wishes to welcome the new Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom, and assures her of its support.

Côte d'Ivoire reiterates its concern about the lack of significant progress in the peace process in the Middle East. It reaffirms its principled position that only credible political dialogue and negotiations between the parties will lead to the viable solution of two States living side by side in peace and security, based on the mutual recognition of the legitimate rights of both parties. It therefore calls for a resumption of talks between Israelis and Palestinians, in keeping with the relevant Council resolutions with a view to breaking the current political impasse.

The socioeconomic, political and humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip also remains worrisome and critical. On the economic front, my delegation remains concerned about persistent youth unemployment in the context of an acute economic crisis aggravated by the lack of water, electricity and medicine.

On the political and humanitarian front, the resurgent tensions between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas hamper the return of the Palestinian Authority to the Gaza Strip and undermine national reconciliation efforts between the two entities. In that connection, my delegation condemns the 13 March attack on the convoy of Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah in the Gaza Strip. We urge the Palestinian parties to show restraint and to conduct all necessary investigations to apprehend the perpetrators of the attack. We encourage the parties to pursue dialogue to ensure the effective return of the Palestinian Authority to Gaza, in accordance with the reconciliation agreement signed in October, in order to better manage the humanitarian situation.

In the context of ever-decreasing contributions to the budget of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), my delegation welcomes the significant financial contribution of $100 million made during the Extraordinary Ministerial Conference in support of UNRWA on 15 March in Rome. It thanks Member States for the show of active solidarity with the Palestinian people and refugees at a time when UNRWA is experiencing the most serious financial crisis in its history. It encourages the international community, including relevant humanitarian agencies, civil society and the private sector to contribute in order to bridge the lack of financing.

In conclusion, my delegation unreservedly commits to the goal of lasting comprehensive peace in the Middle East and reiterates in readiness to work alongside Council members to bring about a peaceful solution to the Israeli-Palestinian crisis.

Mr. Alotaibi (Kuwait) (*spoke in Arabic*): I would like to start by joining those who preceded me in congratulating and welcoming Ambassador Karen Pierce, the new Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom, and wishing her every success.

I thank Mr. Mladenov, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, for his valuable briefing today. We would like to express our full support for his work with his team and for the work of the United Nations regarding the monitoring of developments related to the issue under consideration.

In his briefing, Mr. Mladenov spoke of the deteriorating situation in the occupied territories while Israel, the occupying Power, continues to violate international law and undermine international efforts to achieve peace based on a two-State solution. The fact that Israel is not shouldering its responsibilities at the international level as the occupying Power — based on the 1949 Fourth Geneva Convention — and that it does not comply with, and even disregards, United Nations resolutions demonstrates that Israel does not heed the decisions of the international community. This is the main reason behind the humanitarian tragedy that has befallen the unarmed Palestinian people, which obviously only fuels tensions in the region. The Palestinian question is still at the heart of the regional conflict, so it is essential to focus on this matter rather than on other issues, regardless of their importance.

We condemn all unilateral Israeli policies, actions and measures that seek to change the situation on the ground in order to create a new status quo and to undermine the two-State solution based on the 1967 borders. Israel, the occupying Power, pursues its aggressive policies and provocative and unilateral measures that contravene Security Council resolutions and international conventions. We remind the Council of the serious potential consequences of the decision to transfer of the United States embassy to Jerusalem on 14 May. That decision is null and void since it is in explicit contravention of resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973), 476 (1980), 478 (1980) and 2334 (2016).

In violating Security Council resolutions, particularly 2334 (2016), Israel, the occupying Power, is maintaining its expansionist, illegal and illegitimate activities, as Mr. Mladenov noted today. In that regard, we demand to see a written report on the status of the implementation of resolution 2334 (2016). Here in the Council, we are dealing with an issue of 50 years of occupation. It is essential, therefore, that we talk about putting an end to the occupation as a precondition to any negotiation between the two parties to achieve a definitive, comprehensive and just solution. Indeed, partial solutions have produced no results.

Despite the challenges to reaching a two-State solution, due to the illegal and illegitimate aggressive practices and settlement policies of the occupying Power, we still believe that such a solution — based on a clear timetable, the relevant resolutions of the United Nations, the principle of land for peace and the Arab Peace Initiative, which ensures the establishment of an independent Palestinian State along the borders of 4 June 1967 and with East Jerusalem as its capital — is the only way to achieve security and stability.

We would like to express our profound concern with regard to the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Gaza, which is a crisis that has lasted for more than a decade due to the unjust and oppressive blockade imposed by the occupying forces of Israel. Mr. Mladenov noted its serious implications today. The blockade enshrines Israel's practices and violations of international humanitarian and human rights law. On this point, I recall the war that was waged by the occupying Power against Gaza from 28 December 2008 until 18 January 2009, which destroyed a great deal of infrastructure.

We would also like to mention the financial crisis facing the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), which is the worst of its kind since the Agency's creation in 1949. The crisis has a had negative impact on the Agency, which plays a pivotal and important role by providing assistance to approximately 6 million Palestinian refugees on its rolls. The Agency has contributed and continues to contribute to stability in the Middle East. The State of Kuwait reiterates the need for donors to provide UNRWA with the necessary funding so that the Agency can continue to provide its vital services to refugees and perform its humanitarian activities without politicization. Reducing funding for UNRWA will lead to a humanitarian disaster and undermine all its education, health care, infrastructure and humanitarian assistance programmes. In this regard, we welcome the initiative of Sweden, Egypt

and Jordan to convene the Extraordinary Ministerial Conference in Rome on 15 March, at which donor States pledged some $100 million to mitigate the shortfall in UNRWA's budget.

In conclusion, when we discuss the topic of the Middle East in the Security Council, we always focus on the Palestinian question. However, it is essential this morning to mention the serious escalation that we witnessed last night in the missile attack by the Houthis from Yemeni territory against several cities in Saudi Arabia, including Riyadh, Khamis Mushait, Najran and Jazan. These missiles, which indiscriminately targeted civilian and inhabited areas, were intercepted by the Saudi air defence forces. However, shrapnel did reach some inhabited areas, causing one death, numerous wounded and property damage.

The State of Kuwait condemns and denounces in the strongest terms this missile attack against the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which is a violation by the Houthis of international law and of relevant Security Council resolutions. It also represents a rejection of peace and contravenes the determination of the international community to put an end to the conflict in Yemen, just as it undermines all opportunities for the international community to seek peace in the region.

The Security Council must be united in expressing its clear opposition to these attacks, which threaten regional peace and security. The State of Kuwait underscores its full support for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and for all the actions the Kingdom may take to maintain its peace and security.

Ms. Pierce (United Kingdom): I offer very many thanks to colleagues for their warm welcome, as this is the first time I take the floor as the Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom. It is an enormous honour to represent the United Kingdom. It is very nice for me personally to be back in New York. I see many good friends in the Chamber, including Ambassador Mansour.

Today's debate is an important one, and I will save the bulk of my remarks for the consultations room, but I just want to make the point that improving the situation on the ground in the occupied Palestinian territories remains vital, particularly in Gaza. We endorse what the Special Coordinator said about the implementation of the relevant Security Council resolutions and about the legitimate Palestinian Authority. Of course, I want to put on record our condemnation of the recent attempted assassination of Prime Minister Hamdallah. We take this opportunity once again to condemn all acts of terror.

I also want to put on record that we are going to talk about improving the situation on the ground, but that will only take us so far. I agree with previous speakers who said that a political horizon is needed so as to keep the prospect of the two-State solution alive. We support peace efforts being advanced by the United States. We look forward to seeing a plan presented at the earliest opportunity. We encourage re-engagement by all sides.

I also want to take the opportunity to follow my colleague from Kuwait and say something about the attack on Saudi Arabia by the Houthis this morning. It is a sad day today because it is the third anniversary of the conflict in Yemen, which is a conflict that has gone on too long, but it is also true that missiles fired into Saudi Arabia against civilians is dangerous and provocative, and will do nothing to help the conflict be resolved. It is against international law. We send our condolences to the Saudi people. We want to see the efforts of the United Nations on a Yemeni political process succeed. As the United Kingdom, we will give our every support to Martin Griffiths and the Secretary-General to that end.

Mr. Miller (United States of America): I will also deliver the bulk of my remarks in consultations, but I want to take the floor here to make a couple of points that it is important to raise in the open Chamber.

First, and above all, I want to extend warm welcome to the new Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom, Ambassador Pierce. We really look forward to working with her.

Secondly, due to the attack in Saudi Arabia from Yemen last night, I thought it was important to raise that matter now as well. We strongly condemn the Houthi missile attack that was aimed at several cities in Saudi Arabia. This is the kind of action that is deeply destabilizing for the region and one that we have warned about previously. Our condolences go out to the families of any who are killed or injured. We also support the right of our Saudi partners to defend their borders against these threats. We continue to call on all parties, including the Houthis, to return to political negotiations and move towards ending the war in the Yemen.

Mr. Wu Haitao (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): First of all, I would like to thank Special Coordinator Mladenov for his briefing. I welcome the new Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom, Ambassador Pierce, to the Security Council.

The question of Palestine is at the core of the Middle East issue and fundamental to peace in that region. Only when the Palestinian question is fully resolved will the crisis in the Middle East be eased for good. The situation in Palestine and Israel is tense at present. Settlement construction continues. Violence is increasing incrementally. The humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip is dire. China is worried about all of these things.

We call on the Security Council and the international community to remain united in an effort to advance the political settlement of the question of Palestine. We believe that the two-State solution is the right way to resolve the question of Palestine. The international community should uphold the relevant United Nations resolutions, the principle of land for peace and the Arab Peace Initiative, and on that basis redouble its efforts to relaunch the negotiations, faithfully implement resolution 2334 (2016), put an end to settlement activities in the occupied territories and prevent violence against civilians. All parties should remain calm, exercise restraint and meet each other halfway. That will help foster the conditions necessary for the resumption of dialogue. Parties with major influence in the Middle East should also play a constructive role in that regard.

China remains committed to supporting and facilitating the Middle East peace process. We support the establishment of a sovereign and independent Palestinian State on the basis of the pre-1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital. China will continue to actively promote the four-point proposal put forward by Chinese President Xi Jinping to promote the resolution of the question of Palestine, calling for the advancement of the political process on the basis of the two-State solution; adherence to the philosophy of shared, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security; greater coordination of international efforts to maximize synergy for peace; and a holistic approach to achieving peace through development. China will continue to play a constructive role in the Middle East peace process. China remains open to any initiative or effort aimed at achieving a political settlement of the Palestinian question, easing the tensions between Palestine and Israel, and facilitating the achievement of the two-State solution.

The question of Jerusalem is complex and delicate and must be addressed as a fundamental issue within the broader Palestinian question. All parties should respect its multifaceted history, uphold fairness and justice, implement international consensus, strive for peaceful coexistence and act in accordance with relevant United Nations resolutions so as to reach a solution that accommodates all the interests of all parties through final-status negotiations. Palestine and Israel should respect each other's right to existence and avoid any action that may aggravate the current situation.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) has played an indispensable role in alleviating the humanitarian crisis in the occupied territories. China welcomes the success of the UNRWA Extraordinary Ministerial Conference on financing, which was recently held in Rome. We call on all parties to scale up their support for UNRWA and countries hosting Palestinian refugees so as to steadily improve the humanitarian conditions in which the refugees are living.

The meeting rose at 11 a.m.

United Nations S/PV.8215

Security Council

Seventy-third year

Provisional

8215th meeting
Tuesday, 27 March 2018, 10 a.m.
New York

President:	Mr. Blok	(Netherlands)
Members:	Bolivia (Plurinational State of)	Mr. Inchauste Jordán
	China	Mr. Wu Haitao
	Côte d'Ivoire	Mr. Dah
	Equatorial Guinea	Mr. Ndong Mba
	Ethiopia	Mr. Alemu
	France	Mr. Delattre
	Kazakhstan	Mr. Umarov
	Kuwait	Mr. Alotaibi
	Peru	Mr. Meza-Cuadra
	Poland	Ms. Wronecka
	Russian Federation	Mr. Polyanskiy
	Sweden	Mr. Orrenius Skau
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Ms. Pierce
	United States of America	Ms. Tachco

Agenda

The situation in Somalia

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18-08557 (E)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.15 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in Somalia

The President: In accordance with rule 37 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the representative of Somalia to participate in this meeting.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

Members of the Council have before them document S/2018/257, which contains the text of a draft resolution submitted by the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

The Council is ready to proceed to the vote on the draft resolution before it. I shall put the draft resolution to the vote now.

A vote was taken by show of hands.

In favour:

Bolivia (Plurinational State of), China, Côte d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia, France, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Netherlands, Peru, Poland, Russian Federation, Sweden, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, United States of America

The President: The draft resolution received 15 votes in favour. The draft resolution has been adopted unanimously as resolution 2408 (2018).

I wish to remind all speakers to limit their statements to no more than five minutes in order to enable the Council to carry out its work expeditiously.

I give the floor to the representative of Somalia.

Mr. Osman (Somalia): It is an honour for me to speak again before the Security Council today. I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate you, Mr. President, on your country's assumption of the presidency of the Council for this month. I wish to assure you of my delegation's full support during your term in office.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank your predecessor, the Permanent Representative of Kuwait, for his outstanding work on his watch in the month of February.

I appreciate the Council's invitation and am pleased to be present here to witness the adoption of the very important resolution 2408 (2018), which I believe provides essential assistance to our Government and facilitates its policy of developing Somalia in the areas of political inclusiveness, governance, economic development and security, among other things. We welcome this unanimous adoption and appreciate the support and constructive engagement of Council members in committing to support Somalia and my Government's efforts to tackle the many complex challenges it is facing. Though there may be nuanced differences in how Council members assess the current situation, we are united in recognizing the important role that the United Nations will continue to play in promoting peace and stability in Somalia.

I believe that the resolution adopted this morning will ensure that the support of the United Nations and the Security Council, and in particular of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM), for Somalia will be truly effective. We are also confident that the Security Council, the international community as a whole and other partners in the development of Somalia's future will adhere to the principle that it clearly expresses, which is that the current national reconstruction efforts in which we are engaged in the Somali Republic must be Somali-driven and must be seen to be so.

That said, we remain deeply concerned about comments that have periodically been made by senior UNSOM officials at conferences containing statements on political issues on Somalia that are sometimes erroneous. We are further troubled by the negative effects that these statements have in the Security Council and in Somalia. Those actions should not distract Council members from the challenges and issues on the ground. Accordingly, we strongly urge the UNSOM leadership to remain committed to carrying out its duties, as set out in the Mission's mandate, and to refrain from sensationalizing political trends, which can be harmful to our current efforts in the Government-led political process, as well as to peace and political stability in Somalia.

The Somali Government will continue to strive for unity and work to enhance constructive dialogue in order to settle the outstanding issues between the Federal Government and all regional authorities. Nonetheless, we cannot tolerate any unconstitutional decisions taken by regional authorities, including that of the north-

western region of Somalia —Somaliland — since such actions may undermine Somalia's unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity, which are all guaranteed under our Constitution.

In that regard, with our sights set on preserving the unity of Somalia's territory and people, our Parliament voted to unanimously reject the United Arab Emirates-based Dubai Ports World agreement with the north-western regional authority of Somaliland and to commit the Government of Somalia to taking measures to secure Somalia's unity and sovereignty under article 1 of our Constitution. Besides that, two years ago, the United Arab Emirates signed an agreement with Somaliland regional authorities to establish a military base in Berbera, without the consent of the Federal Government of Somalia. The Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea confirms in its latest annual report (S/2017/924) that construction of the new facilities is under way. The Monitoring Group further states that the establishment of a foreign military base in Berbera, involving the transfer of military material to the territory, would constitute a violation of the arms embargo on Somalia.

These actions taken by the United Arab Emirates in Somalia are in clear violation of international law, the Charter of the United Nations and the norms of international relations and international cooperation. The Federal Government of Somalia therefore calls on the Security Council to take the necessary steps, in accordance with its mandate, to maintain international peace and security, put an end to those actions and ensure the implementation of its resolution on Somalia. The Federal Government of Somalia strongly condemns these blatant violations and reaffirms that it will take the necessary measures to deal with them, deriving from its primary responsibility to defend the inviolability of the sovereignty and unity of Somalia in accordance with the Somali Constitution and international law and covenants.

I should not end my remarks without once again expressing to the Council the gratitude of the people and the Government of the Federal Republic of Somalia for the continued support of the United Nations in preserving the sovereignty and territorial integrity of our country and guaranteeing its peace and political stability.

The meeting rose at 10.25 a.m.

United Nations S/PV.8216

Security Council

Seventy-third year

Provisional

8216th meeting
Tuesday, 27 March 2018, 10.25 a.m.
New York

President:	Mr. Blok	(Netherlands)
Members:	Bolivia (Plurinational State of)	Mr. Inchauste Jordán
	China	Mr. Wu Haitao
	Côte d'Ivoire	Mr. Dah
	Equatorial Guinea	Mr. Ndong Mba
	Ethiopia	Mr. Alemu
	France	Mr. Delattre
	Kazakhstan	Mr. Umarov
	Kuwait	Mr. Alotaibi
	Peru	Mr. Meza-Cuadra
	Poland	Ms. Wronecka
	Russian Federation	Mr. Polyanskiy
	Sweden	Mr. Orrenius Skau
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Ms. Pierce
	United States of America	Ms. Tachco

Agenda

The situation concerning the Democratic Republic of the Congo

Report of the Secretary-General on progress in the implementation of the 31 December 2016 political agreement (S/2018/128)

Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (S/2018/174)

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18-08563 (E)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.25 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation concerning the Democratic Republic of the Congo

Report of the Secretary-General on progress in the implementation of the 31 December 2016 political agreement (S/2018/128)

Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (S/2018/174)

The President: In accordance with rule 37 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the representative of the Democratic Republic of the Congo to participate in this meeting.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

Members of the Council have before them document S/2018/260, which contains the text of a draft resolution submitted by France.

I wish to draw the attention of Council members to document S/2018/128, which contains the report of the Secretary-General on progress in the implementation of the 31 December 2016 political agreement, and document S/2018/174, which contains the report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The Council is ready to proceed to the vote on the draft resolution before it. I shall put the draft resolution to the vote now.

A vote was taken by show of hands.

In favour:

Bolivia (Plurinational State of), China, Côte d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia, France, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Netherlands, Peru, Poland, Russian Federation, Sweden, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, United States of America

The President: The draft resolution received 15 votes in favour. The draft resolution has been adopted unanimously as resolution 2409 (2018).

I shall now give the floor to those members of the Council who wish to make statements after the voting.

Ms. Tachco (United States of America): I would like to welcome you, Sir, as you preside over the Security Council today. I would also like to thank Ambassador Delattre for France's work on this very important mandate.

We are entering a critical time with regard to the Democratic Republic of the Congo and today's vote represents a pivotal juncture for the United Nations Mission there. Just as the previous United Nations Mission helped organize the first free elections in more than 40 years in 2006, the current Mission is now poised to help support the first peaceful transfer of power in the country's history. It has not always been clear that this day would come. Last year the Council said all the right things about prioritizing the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), but throughout the year it was clear that the Mission continued to be pulled in multiple directions. Its mandate was too broad and unfocused.

The Secretary-General's strategic review recognized that lack of focus and called for streamlining the mandate to emphasize a limited set of priorities. We shared that view and have fought to ensure that the protection of civilians and support of the electoral process are at the heart of the Mission. By streamlining the number of non-priority tasks and directing the Mission to allocate resources according to the tasks that remain, we have made it clear that the Mission and the Council will work to fulfil their common purpose, which is ensuring that elections are held. After all, without free, open and credible elections in December, anything that MONUSCO sets out to do will be complicated by political unrest and the spectre of violence.

We even took the step of endorsing key benchmarks leading to elections in December. In advancing those benchmarks, the Mission must work closely with the country's Independent National Electoral Commission, while the Secretary-General must provide honest, accurate assessments of progress — or the lack of it, as the case may be — in the approach to election day. However, adhering to an electoral calendar will

mean little if the Congolese people are denied their fundamental rights to freedom of expression and assembly, or the right to choose among a variety of credible candidates. Free and fair elections simply cannot coexist with attempts to harass, intimidate or otherwise silence voters.

Beyond elections, we sought to make the Mission more responsive by clarifying that the Intervention Brigade operates under the command of the United Nations Force Commander. That mandate enables the Force Commander to deploy the Intervention Brigade throughout the entire country rather than confining it to the east, and ensures that a unified command structure can respond to the needs of the Congolese people. We also sought to improve the performance of MONUSCO's troops. Too many peacekeepers and innocent civilians lost their lives in the past year when the Mission's forces failed to respond. We must hold troops to the highest possible standards and demand accountability if they underperform. The Secretary-General can make a real difference by ensuring that troop performance reviews presented to the Council are clear and actionable. That includes taking concrete steps to address sexual exploitation and abuse. MONUSCO had more reported allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse than any other United Nations peacekeeping mission in 2017. That cannot continue.

Ultimately, the leaders of the Democratic Republic of the Congo must take responsibility for the future of their country. No Security Council resolution or peacekeeping mission will bring about this incredible country's true potential. There must be the political will necessary to bring about change and to see elections through in 2018. We call on the United Nations, and all States Members of the United Nations, particularly regional partners, to invest more than troops or money. We call on them to invest their time and political capital in promoting free and fair Congolese elections in 2018. The people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo must know that we have their backs, and the Government must know that failure is not an option.

Mr. Polyanskiy (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): The Russian Federation supported the adoption of resolution 2409 (2018), which renews the mandate of the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) for one year. When drafting the resolution, we took into account the overall situation in the country, the assessments by regional Powers and the views of the leaders of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. We hope that holding the elections on 23 December, as scheduled, will help to reduce tensions in the country.

We welcome the measures that the authorities in the Democratic Republic of the Congo have undertaken in preparation for the December elections, including the passing of a new electoral law, finalization of the revised electoral lists, Parliament's approval of an electoral budget and publication of the election timetable by the Independent National Electoral Commission. In the light of comments that have already made today on the subject of elections, we would like to note that one of the core principles of resolution 2409 (2018) is respect for the sovereignty of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In that regard, there should be no attempts to impose solutions to electoral issues on Kinshasa. That also applies to discussions on the issue of using voting machines.

During the critical pre-election period we call on MONUSCO's leadership to keep strictly to the mandate set forth in the resolution adopted today. We would like to recall that pursuant to resolution 2409 (2018), the protection of civilians during the electoral process must be carried out with full respect for the core principles of peacekeeping and without interfering in Kinshasa's domestic affairs. It will be crucial to avoid any possibility of a situation in which MONUSCO will be supporting one of the Congolese parties, especially especially under the pretext of combatting violence surrounding the elections.

Mr. Wu Haitao (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): In recent years, the Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo has been actively advancing the peace process and enhancing capacity-building in the area of security and governance, and China commends those efforts. Meanwhile, the country is still facing multiple challenges on the political, security and humanitarian fronts and needs the ongoing support and assistance of the international community.

The United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) has played an important role in maintaining peace and stability there, and the international community should continue to support it in implementing its mandate. Against that backdrop, China voted in favour of the Council's adoption today

of resolution 2409 (2018), which extends MONUSCO's mandate.

China has always maintained that in providing assistance to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the international community should ensure that its Government takes the lead in resolving its own issues and that its sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity is fully respected, helping it to strengthen its own security so that it can achieve peace and stability on its own.

China has always supported a peace process in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and has taken an active part in peacekeeping operations there. We have also provided humanitarian assistance, such as medicine and food, and we have actively participated in its reconstruction and economic and social development. China stands ready to work with the international community to continue to play a constructive role in achieving peace, stability and development in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Ms. Pierce (United Kingdom): I would like to welcome you to the Council today, Mr. President, and to thank France for its work in facilitating the unanimous adoption of resolution 2409 (2018).

I would like to concentrate on the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) itself, which has a vital job to do. This is a crucial time in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It stands poised on the verge of hope. With nine months to go before the elections, the country is facing increased insecurity and a deteriorating humanitarian situation in many areas.

MONUSCO needs the strong backing of the Security Council now more than ever, so our unanimous adoption today of resolution 2409 (2018) is all the more important. We particularly welcome the resolution's clear focus on two priorities for the Mission — protecting civilians and supporting the implementation of the 2016 political agreement. As outlined in its strategic review, a whole-of-Mission approach will be needed to successfully deliver on those objectives. We also welcome the strategic review's focus on enabling MONUSCO to evolve so that it is flexible and agile and can respond to emerging protection threats. We welcome the proposals to unlock the Intervention Brigade. At the same time, we should keep these changes under review and make adjustments where necessary, including dealing with the question of temporary reinforcement.

The resolution is clear that the elections must go ahead on 23 December and lead to a peaceful transfer of power in accordance with the Constitution. All parties must ensure that the conditions are in place for credible elections to take place, which means sticking to the electoral calendar and ensuring full implementation of the December 2016 political agreement, including ensuring respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. The Security Council should closely follow progress against these benchmarks in the coming months.

Finally, I would like to stress that the United Kingdom strongly welcomes the language in the resolution on sexual exploitation and abuse. We fully support the Secretary-General's zero-tolerance policy and urge the United Nations to keep the Council fully informed on its progress in implementing that policy.

Mr. Orrenius Skau (Sweden): We also welcome the adoption of resolution 2409 (2018) and thank the French delegation for its work in facilitating the Security Council's work on the resolution.

The year 2018 will be a crucial one for the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and it is clear that the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) has a critical role to play. One decisive step towards peace and stability will be the holding of credible, transparent, inclusive and peaceful elections on 23 December, ensuring the democratic transfer of power, in accordance with the Constitution and the 31 December 2016 political agreement. MONUSCO has now been given the task of providing the Democratic Republic of the Congo with logistical and technical support and good offices for this endeavour, including ensuring the participation, involvement and representation of women at all levels. It has also been given the task of protecting civilians through a comprehensive approach, making better use of early warning and early responses, including prevention, as well as by improving its military response. In all of this, the Mission needs to be given adequate resources.

I would also like to take this opportunity to underline the important role of the relevant regional organizations and neighbouring countries in ensuring an environment for credible elections. We look forward to continuing to engage with regional actors in order

to facilitate united Council action in support of such efforts.

Mr. Delattre (France) (*spoke in French*): France welcomes the unanimous adoption of resolution 2409 (2018), which renews the mandate of the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO). With this unanimous adoption, the Security Council has once again shown its unity with regard to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a unity that is an essential condition for the success of the process under way.

First, the Council has shown its unity regarding the political and security situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The upcoming electoral period will be crucial to the future not only of the country but of the region as a whole. These elections should enable the Democratic Republic of the Congo, for the first time in its history, to experience a peaceful transfer of power. The challenge is historic and is being confronted in a delicate context. Without credible and universally accepted elections, the stability of the country and the entire region is at stake. To meet that challenge, several conditions, which the Security Council stresses in the resolution, are necessary.

The first is confidence in the technical process of organizing elections and respect for the electoral calendar. The Council calls on the Congolese officials in charge of organizing the elections, and in particular the Independent National Electoral Commission, to do everything possible to ensure the transparency and credibility of the elections. That includes the effective establishment of the team of international electoral experts that the African Union, the Southern African Development Community, the European Union, the United Nations and the International Organization of la Francophonie have proposed to deploy.

The second condition is the creation of an open and peaceful climate in which all candidates can declare their candidacies and campaign freely without fear of reprisal. The Council reiterates its call for respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, starting with the right to assembly, as well as the need for the proportionate use of force in the preservation of public order. It calls for the general ban on demonstrations to be lifted. It is essential that the violations that have been seen during the latest demonstrations do not recur and that the perpetrators be brought to justice. In this respect, the Council welcomes the establishment of a joint Congolese commission of inquiry and calls for the implementation of its recommendations. With respect to all these aspects, the Council will continue to follow the electoral preparations very closely and will work in close coordination with the countries of the region to facilitate free, credible, transparent and peaceful elections.

Secondly, the Council has demonstrated its unity with respect to the role it wishes to give to MONUSCO. The Mission has two very clear and closely related priorities: the protection of civilians, on the one hand, and support for the preparation of elections and the implementation of the 31 December 2016 political agreement, on the other. All other Mission activities must be carried out in support of those priorities. Without adequate preparation for the elections, the stability of the country and the security of civilians are at risk. If civilians are not protected, it is the exercise of their right as citizens to decide their future that could be called into question.

Finally, in the resolution, the Council strongly encourages MONUSCO to pursue the internal reforms initiated this year following its strategic review. Progress has been made, and the Mission has undertaken the necessary adjustments. It is seeking to be more responsive and mobile and to make better use of all the tools at its disposal. The integrated approach to the protection of civilians is welcome, as is the concept of protection by projection. The Council has given MONUSCO a clear and achievable mandate and the means to accomplish its tasks, including maintaining its troop ceiling. That is an essential point. It encourages the Secretariat and the Mission, together with its troop-contributing countries, to pursue these reforms with ambition.

Beyond MONUSCO, by successfully coordinating the implementation of the 31 December 2016 political agreement, it is up to all of us — but first and foremost, of course, the Congolese themselves, and especially the regional actors involved under the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework agreement, and the region as a whole — to enable all Congolese to regain confidence in the electoral process so that free, inclusive, credible and transparent elections can be held on 23 December. The measures for easing tensions that are provided for in the agreement should contribute to this end.

In our view, those are the conditions for the success of the electoral process in the Democratic Republic

of the Congo within the agreed timetable. The unity we have shown today is an essential asset in this respect. The Council should rest assured of France's firm commitment in this direction in support of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The President: I shall now make a statement in my capacity as representative of the Netherlands.

Today the Security Council sends a strong signal that it stands united in support of the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO). In particular, the Council has reaffirmed the political and technical support that MONUSCO will give to the electoral process. The Kingdom of the Netherlands firmly believes that MONUSCO can and must contribute to the restoration of trust among all parties.

We also welcome the clear benchmarks for the electoral process. We will continue to monitor them, together with the implementation of the 31 December political agreement. We also welcome the addition of a provision on the protection of peaceful demonstrators as part of the protection-of-civilians mandate. The Mission is becoming increasing mobile and agile. We are therefore pleased with the emphasis on the importance of community engagement, key enablers and early warning and response. These are conditions for the successful implementation of the strategic review.

We look forward to the comprehensive performance review and efforts to improve the Mission's effectiveness.

Lastly, the Netherlands fully supports the request to the Secretary-General to carry out contingency planning. That could be a vital tool for preventing the conflict from escalating. This is a crucial year for the Democratic Republic of the Congo, as the country prepares itself for its first-ever democratic transfer of power. Today the Council has sent a strong signal that it not only stands united behind MONUSCO but, more importantly, behind the people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

I now resume my functions as President of the Security Council.

I give the floor to the representative of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Mr. Gata Mavita Wa Lufuta (Democratic Republic of the Congo) (*spoke in French*): As your presidency of the Security Council nears its end, my delegation is honoured to be able to congratulate you, Sir, and express its satisfaction and appreciation for the outstanding way in which the Netherlands has led the work of the Council for the month of March.

My delegation is also grateful for the opportunity you have given me to speak to the Council at today's meeting, held to adopt resolution 2409 (2018), which renews the mandate of the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO). I also want to emphasize how much we respect the Council and once again convey to its members the gratitude of the Government and the people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo for the consistent interest that the Council has taken in my country's situation.

My delegation takes note of the Council's adoption of resolution 2409 (2018), thereby extending the mandate of the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) to 31 March 2019. We believe that in taking this action, the United Nations, through the Council, has reaffirmed its willingness to spare no effort to continue the struggle begun nearly two decades ago to help us restore peace and stability in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

In that regard, what should the Congolese people expect from the mandate? Before answering that question, it is worth mentioning here that, as we have always said, MONUSCO is in the Democratic Republic of Congo at the explicit request of the Congolese Government. It has been operating there for almost 20 years. During that time, the Security Council has renewed successive mandates of the Mission despite the fact that none of them have been implemented to the satisfaction of our people, with the result that many friendly countries are still wondering what this United Nations Mission has been doing in the Democratic Republic of the Congo for all those years. As Mr. Léonard She Okitundu, our Vice-Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Regional Integration, underscored to the Council on 7 March (see S/PV.8198), my Government's view is that the renewal of MONUSCO's mandate must not become mere routine but should rather represent an opportunity to assess the achievements and failures of previous mandates so as to make the necessary adjustments and corresponding improvements.

Accordingly, the renewal of the mandate should take into account the expectations of the Congolese

people, whose greatest desire is to see the negative forces and various armed groups that are running rampant in the eastern part of our country totally eradicated. In other words, the new mandate of MONUSCO should be implemented in such a way as to enable it to effectively achieve the goals that the Council has set for it, so that peace will be restored to the people in the country's eastern regions. As we understand it, therefore, while the initial mission of the United Nations forces in the Democratic Republic of the Congo was about peacekeeping and later became part of the efforts to stabilize the situation on the ground, they should now be dedicated first and foremost to their main, defined tasks.

Given that, we believe that today's resolution has two major shortcomings that could jeopardize the ability to achieve its goals. They are the excessive number of its tasks and its ordering and choice of priorities. With regard to their excessive number, we should point out that in the context of stabilizing the situation on the ground, MONUSCO's first responsibility, as most Council members have said, is combating armed groups so as to protect civilians and restore the peace and security that we so urgently need in the country's eastern region. In that regard, we have to say that the Congolese people find it difficult to understand why MONUSCO has to take on other responsibilities when it has still not satisfactorily fulfilled its primary task. In our view, assigning it new tasks takes it even further away from its essential mission.

With regard to the choice of priorities, we believe that better results would be achieved by organizing them starting with combating the armed groups and protecting civilians. Members of the Council will agree that the best way to protect our civilians must be by combating the armed groups, considering that in the eastern part of our country, which is embroiled in armed conflict, civilians are suffering from the worst misdeeds and every kind of abuse at the hands of armed groups and negative forces. Considering the time that MONUSCO has dedicated to resolving that issue, we believe that the resolution could have included a timeline, with a deadline for their eradication. Moreover, given the close links between the armed groups' activities and the illicit traffic in minerals, it would have made a great deal of sense for the resolution to prioritize combating the illicit trade in natural resources in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Needless to say, it is an illusion to believe that we can protect civilians without countering the armed groups, just as we cannot eradicate the armed groups without addressing their sources of funding and supply channels.

The second priority could have focused on stabilization and implementing the disarmament, demobilization, repatriation and reintegration (DDRR) programme. In order to achieve stabilization in the eastern part of the country, stabilization and the support programme for DDRR need to be included among the priorities of MONUSCO's mandate. As Council members are aware, the DDRR programme is crucial to reintegrating ex-combatants into their communities in order to prevent them from being re-recruited by armed groups. The third and fourth priorities could have been reform of the security sector and, lastly, support for the electoral process.

I should add to this the fact that the Council has failed to take into consideration my Government's position regarding its desire for a substantial decrease in the numbers of MONUSCO's troops before the Mission's final withdrawal, which we have expressed to the Council for two years through the strategic dialogue with MONUSCO and which was reiterated on 7 March by my Vice-Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Regional Integration. We believe that the Council's position on this cannot be justified by using the holding of elections as a reason not to honour that request.

Despite all those issues, we are pleased to note that the resolution recognizes the importance of the Intervention Brigade and provides for strengthening its operational effectiveness. For my Government, the Intervention Brigade, which so far has been the only offensive force dealing with armed groups, will have to work closely with the Forces armées de la République démocratique du Congo (FARDC). If it is to regain its former effectiveness, it will have to be adequately equipped. It will therefore appropriate to authorize, as part of its arsenal, its use of Tanzanian artillery and South African aviation, which at one point it had to give up, leading to its ineffectiveness.

In conclusion, I would be remiss if I did not convey the mixed feelings of the Congolese people who, given the failure of MONUSCO's efforts to combat the armed groups, would like to see it finally fulfil its mandated mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In that context, as my Vice-Prime Minister said in this Chamber, we believe that the United Nations will have

succeeded in the Democratic Republic of the Congo only when the question of the renewal of MONUSCO's mandate no longer needs to be discussed, because we will have achieved the goal for which it was deployed in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In that regard, again as my Vice-Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Regional Integration underscored, we hope that today's resolution will represent the penultimate renewal of MONUSCO's mandate. It is therefore important to ensure that it is built up under the leadership of the FARDC so that all the negative forces in the Democratic Republic of the Congo are finally neutralized and the peace that the people in the eastern regions of my country dream of becomes a reality there.

The meeting rose at 11 a.m.

United Nations S/PV.8217

Security Council

Seventy-third year

Provisional

8217th meeting

Tuesday, 27 March 2018, 11.10 a.m.

New York

President:	Mr. Blok	(Netherlands)
Members:	Bolivia (Plurinational State of)	Mr. Inchauste Jordán
	China	Mr. Wu Haitao
	Côte d'Ivoire	Mr. Dah
	Equatorial Guinea	Mr. Ndong Mba
	Ethiopia	Mr. Alemu
	France	Mr. Delattre
	Kazakhstan	Mr. Umarov
	Kuwait	Mr. Alotaibi
	Peru	Mr. Meza-Cuadra
	Poland	Ms. Wronecka
	Russian Federation	Mr. Nebenzia
	Sweden	Mr. Orrenius Skau
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Ms. Pierce
	United States of America	Mrs. Haley

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East

Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016) and 2393 (2017) (S/2018/243)

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The meeting was called to order at 11.10 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East

Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016) and 2393 (2017) (S/2018/243)

The President: In accordance with rule 37 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic to participate in this meeting.

In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite Mr. Mark Lowcock, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, to participate in this meeting.

Mr. Lowcock is joining today's meeting via video-teleconference from Geneva.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

I wish to draw the attention of the members of the Council to document S/2018/243, which contains the report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016) and 2393 (2017).

Recalling the latest note by the President of the Security Council on its working methods (S/2017/507), I want to encourage all participants, both members and non-members of the Council, to deliver their statements in five minutes or less. Note 507 also encourages briefers to be succinct and focus on key issues. Briefers are further encouraged to limit initial remarks to 15 minutes or less.

I now give the floor to Mr. Lowcock.

Mr. Lowcock: As all members of the Council know, the Syrian conflict has now entered its eighth year. When weapons speak, civilians pay the price — a relentless price with horrific violence, bloodshed and unspeakable suffering. The past few months have been some of the worst yet for many civilians in Syria.

Today I want to start with the situation in eastern Ghouta. Since the adoption of resolution 2401 (2018) on 24 February, military operations in eastern Ghouta, in particular air strikes, have reportedly killed more than 1,700 people. Thousands more have been injured. Attacks on critical civilian infrastructure, such as medical facilities, continue to be reported. There have been at least 28 reported attacks on health facilities since mid-February and more than 70 verified incidents since the beginning of the year. The World Health Organization has reported that attacks on health facilities, health workers and health infrastructure were recorded during the first two months of the year at three times the rate that we saw during 2017.

In recent weeks in Damascus city, at least 78 people were reportedly killed and another 230 injured by shells fired from eastern Ghouta. That includes reports of at least 35 people killed and scores wounded on 20 March, when Kashkul market in Jaramana, a suburb in the south-eastern part of the city, was struck by a rocket. Tens of thousands of civilians have been displaced from Douma, Harasta, Sagba and Kafr Batna in recent days and weeks. So far, reports indicate that some 80,000 civilians have been taken to places in Damascus city and rural Damascus. Nearly 20,000 combatants and civilians have been transported to locations in north-western Syria.

Nearly 52,000 civilians from eastern Ghouta are currently being hosted in eight collective shelters in rural Damascus. That displaced population has endured months of limited access to food, medical care and other essential items. In the words of the United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator, Ali Al-Za'tari, who met and spoke to some of them, those people are "tired, hungry, traumatized and afraid". Most of the collective shelters do not have the capacity or infrastructure to accommodate such large numbers of people. They are extremely overcrowded and severely lacking in basic water, sanitation and hygiene facilities. There are a number of serious protection concerns related to risks of gender-based violence, unaccompanied and separated children and restrictions on movement. The United Nations is not in charge of the management of those shelters. However, since 13 March, together with humanitarian partners, we have mobilized a rapid response to provide evacuees with basic support in close coordination with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and other local partners. So far, more than 130,000 non-food items have been distributed, 130 emergency

toilets have been installed, and water trucking services have been provided to most shelters. In addition, supplies to feed more than 50,000 people and a total of 38 mobile health teams and 18 mobile medical teams are currently providing support to those in need inside the shelters.

Humanitarian organizations also need access to the people still trapped within eastern Ghouta, in particular in Douma, where fighting and siege continue. The United Nations and its partners are ready to proceed to Douma with food for up to 16,500 people, as well as health, nutrition, water, sanitation and hygiene supplies, but facilitation letters need to be signed by the Government of Syria.

I reiterate the Secretary-General's call on all parties to fully respect international humanitarian law and human rights law in order to ensure immediate humanitarian access and guarantee the protection of civilians, including in relation to displacements and evacuations. The United Nations and its partners require unimpeded access to all those affected by the situation in eastern Ghouta. That means access to the areas where civilians remain, through which they transit and to which they exit, such as collective shelters, in order to ensure that effective protection mechanisms are in place so that we can deter any possible violations and provide remedial protection support.

Eastern Ghouta is not the only place in which humanitarian needs continue to increase. In north-western Syria, in recent weeks, an estimated 183,500 people have been displaced by hostilities in Afrin district in Aleppo governorate. The majority — some 140,000 people — have fled to Tell Rifaat and the remainder have gone to Nubl, Al-Zahraa, Manbij, Hasakah and surrounding areas. That massive influx of internally displaced persons (IDPs) is putting a strain on host communities, which are already overwhelmed.

Two days ago, on 25 March, an inter-agency convoy to Tell Rifaat delivered assistance for some 50,000 people. However, overall, humanitarian partners are still struggling to gain sustainable access to the area. Moreover, access to Aleppo city for IDPs from Afrin district is currently restricted. Of particular concern are medical evacuations that are urgently required for severely sick people to receive care in specialized hospitals in Aleppo city. Four deaths due to the lack of proper health care have already been reported.

Between 50,000 and 70,000 people are estimated still to be in Afrin city. Humanitarian access to the city and its outer perimeters is possible through cross-border operations mandated by the Council. Today, the Government of Turkey told us that it is positively disposed towards such access, and we plan to run convoys in the very near future. We know that needs are very substantial.

In Idlib governorate, the situation remains catastrophic, with almost 400,000 people displaced since mid-December. Local capacity to assist is overstretched. Thousands more people are now arriving there from eastern Ghouta, with no sites or shelters available for the vast majority of them. We have received reports of an increase in violence in Idlib in recent days. According to local sources, on 20 March air strikes hit an IDP shelter on the outskirts of Haas village in southern rural Idlib governorate, reportedly killing at least 10 displaced people and injuring another 15. On 21 March, air strikes on Kafr Battikh village, also in southern rural Idlib governorate, reportedly killed scores more. The next day, the central market in Harim town was hit by an air strike, reportedly killing 35 people, including many women and children. On 12 March, air strikes also resumed in southern Syria, with attacks being reported in and around Dar'a city. There have been no air strikes in those areas since an agreement was reached last year on the establishment of a de-escalation zone for parts of the south of the country. That therefore appears to be a major unwelcome development.

Let me turn to Raqqa. On 19 March, we received approval from the Syrian authorities for an assessment mission to Raqqa city by the United Nations Mine Action Service, the United Nations Department of Safety and Security, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the World Health Organization. As Council members know, we have been seeking agreement to that for some time. That was on 19 March.

Three days later, on 22 March, the United Nations Department of Safety and Security deployed a team to conduct a security assessment. They report that while the city is considered calm and stable, considerable risk remains. Raqqa city is still highly contaminated with landmines, unexploded ordnances, explosive remnants of war and improvised explosive devices. We hope that access to Raqqa city will be possible for humanitarian aid deliveries via Qamishli, Manbij, Aleppo, Hamah

and Homs, depending on operational and logistical arrangements. The United Nations and our partners are now preparing a humanitarian assessment mission, which is likely to take place next week.

Next I shall address Rukban, on the Syria-Jordan border. United Nations partners received permission from the Syrian authorities on 8 March to organize a humanitarian convoy from Damascus to reach people in need along the Syria-Jordan border. Last week, on 19 March, the United Nations itself received permission to join that humanitarian mission. Preparations are ongoing, and a first humanitarian convoy is expected to deploy soon. As the Council knows, we have been seeking approval for that for many months.

As we sit here today, almost at the end of the month, we have reached some 137,000 people in need through inter-agency convoys — that is, cross-line convoys sent to hard-to-reach and besieged areas — to Tell Rifaat, Al-Dar al-Kabirah and Douma. That is limited, incremental progress, compared to the first part of the year, thanks to the extraordinary efforts of the team on the ground and some of those around this table. But we are essentially just given crumbs — an occasional convoy here and there, often, coincidentally, shortly before our monthly briefings to the Council.

A total of 5.6 million Syrians in acute need cannot live on crumbs, and with a quarter of the year gone, our level of access is currently far worse than it was this time last year. We need the support of all Council members and members of the International Syria Support Group humanitarian task force to do their part to exert their individual and collective influence over the parties.

A few days ago, the Government of Syria and others asked for more United Nations help with humanitarian aid in eastern Ghouta. In response, we have, first, proposed that a team of United Nations emergency response experts be deployed to strengthen efforts on the ground. Visa requests for the team have been submitted. Secondly, we have confirmed a new allocation of $20 million from the Syria Humanitarian Fund, which is managed by my Office, for eastern Ghouta and those displaced from Afrin to provide shelter materials, improve sanitation for displaced people, ensure that safe water is available, provide life-saving medicines and medical services and put in place measures to enhance protection in relocation sites.

The United Nations and its partners, on average, reach 7.5 million people every month with life-saving humanitarian assistance across the whole of Syria. Clearly, without that assistance, the situation would be even more catastrophic than it is now and the loss of life even greater. The United Nations has no money of its own to do those things. We can do them only because we receive voluntary contributions from our donors. I want to take this opportunity to thank everyone who has supported our appeal over the last year, including our top donors: the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom, the European Union, Norway, Canada, Japan, Denmark, Sweden, Qatar, Kuwait and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Resolution 2401 (2018) was adopted just over a month ago. I ask all in the Council to make the resolution a reality. Whatever the difficulty, the United Nations and its partners remain determined to follow through, for the sake of the Syrian people.

The President: I thank Mr. Lowcock for his briefing.

I shall now make a statement in my capacity as the Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

Recently, a Dutch photographer working with Save the Children published a photo album featuring 48 Syrian children, all seven years old. Those photos were school portraits, like we all had taken when we were young. The children were born in Syria, but they had to flee. They are as old as the Syrian war, so they have never seen their country at peace. Their memories of their homeland are fading. Sometimes they cannot remember their country at all, nor their family members left behind. But by giving those young children a public face, the photographer has tried to restore some of the dignity sacrificed to a war in which all humanity seems lost. I have here a photo of Nour.

Those children were relatively lucky; they were able to escape. At the same time, inside Syria, during seven years of war, thousands of children have been killed. I myself am a father, and I am certainly not the only parent in this Chamber. Images of children affected by war should leave no one unmoved. Despite any differences between us, we should at least have one thing in common: the belief that protecting children should come first. Yet, such protection is lacking. The Syrian crisis is, above all, a protection crisis — a grave violation of the long-established norm to protect civilians and their belongings in the time of war.

Together, we — the international community — have expressed our determination to prevent conflict and save succeeding generations from the scourge of war. And where conflict cannot be prevented, we have agreed to regulate the conduct of warfare. One of the very first steps to that end was taken in Russia, almost 150 years ago. In Saint Petersburg, it was decided to forbid weapons that cause unnecessary suffering. Since those first steps, the body of international humanitarian law has grown considerably, including through the adoption of the Hague and Geneva Conventions. The imperative of those laws has always been to protect civilians in conflict, to spare them from disaster, save them from harm and respect their dignity.

Sadly, what we see in Syria today is the exact opposite. Every day, many are showing total disregard for civilians.

In eastern Ghouta, the Syrian regime and its allies, including Russia, have trapped hundreds of thousands of civilians and are relentlessly continuing their offensive. The United Nations has reported air strikes on densely populated areas, blatant attacks targeting hospitals and medical personnel, the use of starvation as a weapon of war and the use of chemical weapons. Many innocent children, women and men are suffering. They should be protected. Yet instead, families are seeing their homes destroyed, their loved ones killed and their dignity shattered. In Afrin, the effects of the Turkey-led offensive are clear for all to see: a worsening of the already precarious humanitarian situation, with more than 160,000 displaced people and a further obstacle to efforts to fight the Islamic State in Iraq and the Sham (ISIS). I ask Turkey not to extend its military activities to other border regions in Syria or Iraq.

Four weeks ago, the Council adopted resolution 2401 (2018). It is telling that in 2018, the Council should need to spell out that warring parties should immediately lift all sieges in Syria and grant unimpeded humanitarian access to those in acute need. Those are by no means exceptional demands. They are basic obligations under international humanitarian law, developed over decades to instil minimum standards of human decency in warfare. Not even the presence of terrorists is an excuse for disregarding those standards. It is humiliating that the Council is unable to enforce those minimum standards. If the Council is not willing or able to do it, who is? With all that in mind, we should not forget that the responsibility, and indeed the obligation, to execute the Council's decisions lies with individual Member States. So what should be done?

First, we should reaffirm these norms and enforce the relevant resolutions. We call on all parties to the Syrian conflict — including the Syrian regime, Russia, Iran, Turkey and armed opposition groups — to respect and implement the Council's decisions. Secondly, we must strengthen resolution 2401 (2018), with United Nations monitoring of the implementation of the ceasefire and with full access for fact-finding missions to sites and collective shelters housing internally displaced persons. These missions are ready to go; we need their impartial information. Thirdly, with regard to accountability, if there is to be any credible, stable and lasting peace in Syria, the current culture of impunity must end. All those guilty of crimes must be brought to justice. The perpetrators of crimes, including ISIS and Al-Qaida, must know that they are being watched, followed and identified. They must know that files are being compiled with a view to prosecuting them for crimes that may include genocide. They must know that one day they will be held accountable.

We urge all States to increase their support for the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Persons Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011, which aims to ensure that information about serious crimes is collected, analysed and preserved for future prosecutions. The Netherlands again calls on all Council members to support referring the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court.

What will become of the children in the photographs I mentioned? Will they one day be able to return to Syria? Like all children, they long for a normal life, for stability, for safety. The Syrian regime believes in a military solution. But there is none. There are no winners in this war. But it is clear who is losing — the ordinary people of Syria. In these most extreme circumstances we commend the incredible courage and perseverance of the humanitarian aid workers.

It is up to us to restore credibility to the Council. It is up to us to ensure a negotiated political process, in which all Syrians and other relevant actors are represented. And it is up to us to end the agony and restore dignity and humanity to the people of Syria.

I now resume my functions as President of the Council.

I give the floor to those members of the Council who wish to make statements.

Mr. Alotaibi (Kuwait) (*spoke in Arabic*): We welcome you, Sir, in presiding over this important meeting. I am delivering this statement on behalf of Kuwait and Sweden. At the outset, I would like to thank the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mr. Mark Lowcock, for his briefing.

Today I will address three main areas: first, the status of the implementation of resolution 2401 (2018); secondly, measures needed to improve the humanitarian situation; and thirdly, the responsibility of the parties to implement the resolution.

First, on the status of the implementation of resolution 2401 (2018), we are meeting today one month after its unanimous adoption by the Security Council, calling on all parties to cease hostilities without delay for 30 days following the adoption of the resolution. We deplore the fact that it has not yet been implemented. However, we must continue to do everything in our power to ensure the resolution's full implementation throughout Syria. The increased number of humanitarian convoys entering the besieged areas during the month of March shows that partial delivery was achieved by comparison to the complete deadlock in access in previous months. That indicates that progress can be made in implementing the resolution, and we must build on that progress.

We affirm that the provisions of the resolution will remain valid beyond the first 30 days after its adoption. We look forward to continued reports from the Secretariat on the status of implementation through monthly briefings, as stipulated in the resolution. In that regard, we support the proposal for providing the Council with further regular updates.

We appreciate the continued efforts of the United Nations to facilitate talks among all parties in eastern Ghouta with the goal of securing a ceasefire. We are particularly concerned about the continued military offensive by the Syrian authorities in eastern Ghouta, as well as air strikes on Dar'a and Idlib. The shelling of Damascus from eastern Ghouta is also a matter of concern. All of those acts of violence have claimed the lives of hundreds of innocent civilians.

Secondly, on measures needed to improve the humanitarian situation, we must take the necessary measures to protect civilians fleeing eastern Ghouta and to improve the humanitarian situation in collective shelters. As we have said before, implementing the provisions of resolution 2401 (2018) is the only way to improve the humanitarian situation and to achieve tangible progress in that regard. Those provisions stipulate that there must be a cessation of hostilities and that access for humanitarian aid to reach the civilian population must be enabled. Regarding the humanitarian situation in eastern Ghouta, we have five points to convey to the relevant parties, which represent our special concerns about the protection of civilians.

First, all evacuations must be voluntary. People must have the right to return and to choose safe places to go to. Secondly, any negotiations on the evacuation of civilians should include civilian representatives, such as local councils. Thirdly, humanitarian aid convoys should continue to enter eastern Ghouta for the benefit of those who decided to stay there. Those convoys should occur on a weekly basis, as stipulated in resolution 2401 (2018), according to the United Nations assessment of needs, including medical supplies, and with full access for United Nations staff. Fourthly, human rights violations, including detentions, disappearances and forced conscriptions, must end. Those are serious protection concerns for civilians staying in eastern Ghouta and for those leaving it. We therefore encourage the United Nations to register the names of those evacuated and their destinations and to reinforce its presence in the collective shelters for internally displaced persons, including through the use of monitors to protect them and prevent sexual violence. We call on the Syrian authorities to grant immediate permission for that. Fifthly, the deteriorating situation in the collective shelters for the internally displaced persons should be improved as quickly as possible as the number of new arrivals continues to rise.

We are deeply concerned that the United Nations partners are bearing the brunt of a burden beyond their capacity. It will therefore be essential to make the maximum use of the United Nations, its staff and its resources in order to assist in managing the increasingly crowded collective shelters. We welcome the United Nations plans to increase staff on the ground to that end, and we encourage the United Nations to do the same for eastern Ghouta as soon as the security situation allows. We call on the Syrian authorities to grant visas for additional United Nations staff immediately.

Thirdly, on the responsibility of the parties to implement the resolution, we have a collective responsibility, as members of the Council and, specifically, as parties with influence, to work with the Syrian authorities and urge them to implement the provisions of resolution 2401 (2018) according to international humanitarian law. We expect the guarantors of the Astana agreement, Russia, Iran and Turkey, to achieve progress towards the fulfilment of the commitments undertaken in the statement they issued on 16 March in advance of their summit meeting, to be held in Istanbul on 4 April. Those commitments include, first, ensuring rapid, safe and unhindered access for humanitarian aid to areas affected by the conflict; secondly, increasing their efforts, as guarantors of the ceasefire agreement, to ensure observance of the respective agreements; and thirdly, pursuing their efforts to implement the provisions of resolution 2401 (2018).

In conclusion, we affirm our full commitment to continuing to follow up closely on the status of the implementation of the resolution in the monthly reports to the Council. We will spare no effort to make progress in its implementation. This month marks the beginning of the eighth year of the conflict in Syria. Sadly, there is still a need for an end to the violence, sustained humanitarian and medical aid through weekly convoys across conflict lines, evacuation operations, the protection of civilians and hospitals, and the lifting of the siege.

Mrs. Haley (United States of America): I thank you, Foreign Minister Blok, for presiding over this meeting, and I thank Under-Secretary-General Lowcock for once again laying out the facts about what is happening in Syria. I also want to personally welcome Karen Pierce to the Council as the new Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom. I know all of us in the Chamber look forward to working with her.

Today we have a very difficult subject to address: siege, starvation and surrender. That is the awful, unceasing rhythm of the Syrian war. As we meet today, the third step, surrender, is taking place in eastern Ghouta. After years of enduring siege and starvation, residents are surrendering eastern Ghouta. The terrible irony of this moment must be stated and acknowledged. In the 30 days since the Security Council demanded a ceasefire, the bombardment of the people of eastern Ghouta has only increased and now, at the end of the so-called ceasefire, eastern Ghouta has nearly fallen.

History will not be kind when it judges the effectiveness of the Council in relieving the suffering of the Syrian people. Seventeen hundred Syrian civilians have been killed in the past month alone. Hospitals and ambulances are being deliberately targeted with bombs and artillery. Schools are being hit, like the one in eastern Ghouta that was bombed just last week, killing 15 children. Siege, starvation and surrender.

I would like to ask my Security Council colleagues to consider whether we are wrong when we point to the Russian and Iranian forces working alongside Al-Assad as being responsible for the slaughter. Russia voted for the so-called ceasefire in Syria last month (see S/PV.8188). More than that, Russia took its time painstakingly negotiating resolution 2401 (2018), which demanded the ceasefire. If we watched closely during the negotiations, we could see our Russian friends constantly leaving the room to confer with their Syrian counterparts. The possibilities for what was going on are only two. Either Russia was informing its Syrian colleagues about the content of the negotiations, or Russia was taking directions from its Syrian colleagues about the content of the negotiations. Either way, Russia cynically negotiated a ceasefire that it instantly defied.

Russia even had the audacity to claim that it is the only Council member implementing resolution 2401 (2018). How can that possibly be true when in the first four days after the so-called ceasefire, Russian military aircraft conducted at least 20 daily bombing missions on Damascus and eastern Ghouta, while the people of Syria remained under siege? The so-called ceasefire was intended to allow humanitarian access to sick and starving civilians. Russia even doubled down on its cynicism by proposing five-hour pauses in the fighting. It said that they were necessary to allow humanitarian convoys to get through, but Russian and Syrian bombs continue to prevent the delivery of humanitarian aid. Only after territory falls into the hands of the Al-Assad Government and its allies do they allow food and medicine to be delivered. Russia and Syria's rationalization is that they have to continue to bomb in eastern Ghouta in order to combat what they call terrorists. That is a transparent excuse for the Russians and Al-Assad to maintain their assault.

Meanwhile, from the very beginning, the opposition groups in eastern Ghouta expressed their readiness to implement the ceasefire. They told the Council that they welcomed the resolution. Russia's response was to call those groups terrorists and keep pummelling

civilians into submission, while the people of Syria continue to starve.

Last week, after Syrian civilians had spent years barely surviving, an agreement was reached to allow them to leave eastern Ghouta. Who brokered it? Russia. So we see the cycle being completed. The people of eastern Ghouta are surrendering. That is the ugly reality on the ground in Syria today. Cynical accusations of bad faith from Russia will not stop us from speaking out, and their blatantly false narratives will not keep us from telling the world about Russia's central role in bombing the Syrian people into submission.

Fifteen days ago, when it was apparent that the Russian, Syrian and Iranian regimes were utterly ignoring the ceasefire, the United States developed a plan for a tougher and more targeted ceasefire focused on Damascus city and eastern Ghouta. Despite overwhelming evidence that the ceasefire was being ignored, some of our colleagues urged us to give resolution 2401 (2018) a chance to work. Reluctantly, we agreed and put off introducing the resolution. Now, more than 80 per cent of eastern Ghouta is controlled by Al-Assad and his allies. Their deception, hypocrisy and brutality have overtaken the chance of a ceasefire in eastern Ghouta, and for that we should all be ashamed.

If we were upholding our responsibility as a Security Council, we would adopt a resolution today recognizing the reality of what happened in eastern Ghouta. A responsible Security Council would condemn the Syrian authorities, along with Russia and Iran, for launching a military offensive to seize eastern Ghouta the same day that we called for a ceasefire. A responsible Security Council would condemn the Al-Assad regime for deliberately blocking convoys of humanitarian aid during its military campaign and removing medical items from convoys that attempted to reach eastern Ghouta. A responsible Security Council would recognize that the provision of humanitarian aid was never safe, unimpeded or sustained, and that there was no lifting of sieges. A responsible Security Council would express its outrage that at least 1,700 civilians were killed during a military campaign that it demanded to come to a halt — 1,700 civilians who should have been spared in the ceasefire we demanded, but who died on our watch.

But we cannot. We cannot take those actions because Russia will stop at nothing to use its permanent seat on the Council to shield its ally Bashar Al-Assad from even the faintest criticism. And we cannot take those actions because instead of calling out the ways in which Al-Assad, Russia and Iran made a mockery of our calls for a ceasefire, too many members of the Council wanted to wait. That is a travesty. This should be a day of shame for every member of the Council and it should be a lesson about what happens when we focus on fleeting displays of unity instead of on what is right. For those who think otherwise, the people of eastern Ghouta deserve an explanation.

Mr. Delattre (France) (*spoke in French*): At the outset, I would like to thank Mark Lowcock for his briefing and to commend him on his tireless efforts and those of his team in their response to the urgent and severe humanitarian situation in Syria.

To address that urgency and severity, a month ago almost to the day the Security Council adopted resolution 2401 (2018). We thus collectively and unanimously demanded that all the parties to the conflict cease hostilities throughout the country to allow for sustained and unimpeded humanitarian access to civilians in need and for medical evacuations.

A month later, what is the situation? Not only has resolution 2401 (2018) not been implemented, but the humanitarian situation in Syria has worsened. The civilian population is living in despair, trapped between bargaining and fighting, particularly in eastern Ghouta.

Over the past few weeks, not only has the fighting has not subsided; it has doubled in intensity, with a land offensive launched by the regime, supported by its allies Russia and Iran. The carefully planned offensive was unremitting, using the double strategy of terror and parallel negotiations that was used in Aleppo to obtain the surrender of combatants and the displacement of civilians. For a month there has not been a single day when eastern Ghouta, which has been besieged and starved for years, has not suffered indiscriminate shelling by the regime and its supporters. They have systematically bombed schools and hospitals and killed more than 1,700 civilians, including more than 300 children. Those deaths are the result of a deliberate strategy of the Syrian regime to forcibly bend an entire population, annihilate any form of opposition and remain in power.

Nothing should justify breaches of international humanitarian law. Not one humanitarian convoy has been authorized to enter eastern Ghouta since 15 March, and almost no humanitarian assistance has

been delivered in recent weeks. Meanwhile, there are immense needs among those still in eastern Ghouta, the majority of whom are women and children.

For several days we have been witnessing forced evacuations of populations from eastern Ghouta, which could constitute crimes against humanity and war crimes. We have demanded humanitarian access to eastern Ghouta in order to provide assistance to people in their own homes, where they wish to stay as long as the ceasefire allows. That was the reason for the adoption of resolution 2401 (2018). Instead, we have witnessed just the opposite — an escalation of violence to force a massive displacement of civilians. Bombing has forced civilians, approximately 80,000 people, to flee. The displacement of people from eastern Ghouta is an integral part of the military strategy of the Syrian regime to force the opposition to capitulate. Once again, civilians are the primary victims.

As I said, those forced displacements could constitute crimes against humanity and war crimes. Evidence of such crimes will be collected, preserved and used. We were clear on that point during the Arria-formula Council meeting with the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights a few days ago. Some 55,000 civilians are now in eight collective camps managed by the Syrian regime around eastern Ghouta, without water or electricity and in disastrous sanitary conditions. Their lot has not improved; their hell has simply moved a few kilometres away. We are extremely concerned about the fate of those civilians who now live in overcrowded conditions, with no assurances of protection or security, with no guarantee that they will return home.

How do we protect civilians in the situation I have just described? It is absolutely urgent to protect those who can still be protected. Although the 30-day cessation of hostilities demanded by resolution 2401 (2018) has still not been implemented, that demand remains, more urgent and relevant than ever. The resolution is still the framework for our collective action. In that regard, and in line with the briefing just given by Mark Lowcock, I would like to underscore three vital demands.

First, it is indispensable and urgent that humanitarian convoys be allowed to enter eastern Ghouta daily and with adequate security. Although humanitarian needs are great, the regime continues to deliberately block aid. United Nations convoys must be able to enter and make deliveries. Fighting must cease long enough to allow for delivery, unloading and distribution of supplies, including of medical assistance.

The second demand concerns civilians who remain in Ghouta, who have the right to emergency humanitarian assistance and to protection. Aid must reach them where they are. To that end, the United Nations and its international and local humanitarian partners must be able to work safely on site to assess the needs of those populations. It is an obligation under international humanitarian law, but it is the minimum required to provide tangible assistance to those concerned. The protection that is due them under international humanitarian law must be unconditionally guaranteed. In that regard I call again on the responsibility of all actors with influence on the Syrian regime.

The third demand, which has taken on new importance in recent days, is for assistance to be provided to the displaced civilians in camps outside Ghouta. Very concretely, that means that those populations, who have been forced to leave everything behind in order to survive, must be assured of their safety, access to basic necessities and a chance to return home when they so desire. Care must be taken that they are not threatened with retaliation, threats or persecution of any kind.

In order to ensure that they are protected, the United Nations and its partners must be able to escort civilians who have been evacuated from their point of departure to their destination in the collective shelters. The United Nations and its partners must be granted continuous access to civilians living in those camps. We hope that the United Nations can strengthen its support to displaced persons who have fled eastern Ghouta. That would call for an increase in the number of international staff on site. We hope that approval will be granted to that end as soon as possible. It would also call for security guarantees for humanitarian workers.

The situation in Afrin is also extremely worrisome. A great many civilians are in a critical situation. More that 180,000 people have been displaced. A single convoy was authorized, yesterday, which is insufficient given the tremendous needs of the population. Ongoing fighting in Afrin has forced the Syrian Democratic Forces to halt operations against Da'esh, whose threat, as we all know, has not dissappeared. Our position on the issue is the same. The legitimate concerns of Turkey with regard to the security of its borders cannot in any way justify a lasting military presence deep inside Syria.

More than ever, we need the fighting to end. We call on all parties on the ground to conclude the negotiations under way and respect a cessation of hostilities. We support the efforts of the Special Envoy for Syria, Mr. Staffan de Mistura, and his commitment to resuming the Geneva process and to reaching a lasting political solution in line with resolution 2254 (2015) that starts with the establishment of an inclusive constitutional committee, under the auspices of Mr. De Mistura. It is the only way to end the Syrian crisis.

It is absolutely essential to work on both the humanitarian and political fronts. I appeal on behalf of France, first, to those who can make a difference on the ground, starting with Russia. It is never to late to save lives. Let us be well aware that without urgent, decisive action, the worst is undoubtedly yet to come in the form of a worsening and enlargement of the conflict.

The time has come for us to learn seriously the lessons of the Syrian tragedy. This tragedy is the illustration of a new global disorder where the rappelling ropes have disappeared due to a lack of strong international governance, a lack of a power of last resort and a lack of convergence among key actors — to which we add the well-known attitude of Russia.

In other words, if we want to avoid other tragedies of this type in future, it is essential to structure the multipolar world in which we now find ourselves around a robust multilateralism embodied by a reformed United Nations. It is the only alternative to the fragmentation of the world and the return to the zones of influence — and our history teaches us all the dangers of that — and it is with the settlement of the Syrian crisis, which is our priority today and which is the emergency before us, one of the other challenges of our generation.

Ms. Pierce (United Kingdom): I thank you, Mr. President, both for being here today to underscore the vital importance of this topic and, in particular, for your very powerful statement. The United Kingdom supports your call for a referral of the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court.

I also wish to express our thanks to the Under-Secretary-General for his continued efforts to keep the Security Council informed of the toll that hostilities are having on civilians in Syria. We also thank him for the heroic efforts of all his teams on the ground. Their efforts are much supported by most of us on the Council.

The Under-Secretary-General's briefing eloquently underscores why it is essential that the Council comes together to agree on concrete steps to allow the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs to fulfil its mandate to ensure humanitarian assistance and protection for everybody who needs it. Ambassador Haley has laid the situation bare, Ambassador Delattre has set out the regime's intentions, and Ambassador Alotaibi has focused on the need for protection and registration. I support their calls. I will not rehearse a catalogue of suffering that we have heard expressed so eloquently today, but that omission should not be taken as any indication that the United Kingdom is not as horrified as others by what is happening on the ground.

Specifically, it is diabolical that access is actually worse in the face of such suffering. Diabolical is a strong word, but there are no others to describe what is happening. The worst destruction and suffering has continued in eastern Ghouta. Those who support Al-Assad have not taken steps to help stop the violence. Instead, Al-Assad and his supporters have violated the strong words of the Security Council in resolution 2401 (2018), making mockery of the Council's authority, as Ambassador Delattre stated.

Since 11 March, an estimated 100,000 people have left eastern Ghouta and are in makeshift reception sites in rural Damascus. Thousands more have been bused to Idlib. Because there is no independent monitoring nor provisions for civilian safety, those fleeing and those staying remain vulnerable and at risk of mistreatment and abuse by the regime, including being detained, disappeared or separated from their families. Humanitarians, health workers and first responders on the ground report that the regime is deliberately targeting them. That is illegal, and those who help the Al-Assad regime are complicit in that illegality.

The situation continues even for those who are left behind. An estimated 150,000 civilians remain in eastern Ghouta. They suffer from acute food shortages and lack of medical supplies. They are afraid, and above all they remember how the regime punished the civilians who fled from eastern Aleppo in December 2016. That is why Ambassador Alotaibi's call for protection and registration is so urgent.

We welcome United Nations plans to scale up support to deal with the dire situations in the internally displaced persons camps and collective shelters. We call on Russia to use its influence with the regime to

ensure that the United Nations and its partners can also provide assistance and protection for those who remain in eastern Ghouta. Whether civilians choose to stay or leave, it is essential that they be protected against attack and have access to the essentials to survive. This is not just a plea on the grounds of humanity; it is a requirement under international humanitarian law. It is the job of the Council and all members of the Council to uphold international humanitarian law. Those who side with the regime in its actions are themselves guilty of violating that law.

In concluding, I would like to highlight two further areas. The suffering of the Syrian people continues in Idlib, where civilians have been under attack by regime forces for many years. More than a million internally displaced Syrians live there, including those who have fled eastern Ghouta. In Afrin, we recognize Turkey's legitimate interest in the security of its borders, but at the same time we remain concerned about the impact of operations on the humanitarian situation, and my Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary have raised the need for protection of civilians and access with President Erdoğan and his Ministers. It was good to hear from the Under-Secretary-General that there may at last be signs of progress in Afrin.

After seven years of conflict, over 13 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance in Syria. The Al-Assad regime has created the situation and is now preventing humanitarian actors from relieving some of the horror it has inflicted. We call on Russia to use its influence to ensure that at a minimum the United Nations can fulfil its mandate to ensure humanitarian assistance and protection for Syrians on the basis of need, regardless of any other considerations.

I was at Geneva in 2012. I think we all feel that that was a huge missed opportunity, in the light of events. The situation has escalated every year since that time, and, as the Under-Secretary-General said, the level of access is worse. The Council has a small opportunity to put measures in place to reduce the risk of reprisals. As you said, Mr. President, if the Security Council cannot do it, who can?

Mr. Umarov (Kazakhstan): I join others in thanking Under-Secretary-General Lowcock for his comprehensive briefing. I also wish to welcome the Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, His Excellency Mr. Stephanus Abraham Blok, who is presiding over today's meeting.

Kazakhstan remains committed to all Security Council resolutions aimed at solving humanitarian issues in Syria. We believe that it is most important to preserve all possible humanitarian-access modalities, including cross-border assistance, which are indispensable in bringing humanitarian aid to millions of people in Syria.

Implementing resolution 2401 (2018) is a collective responsibility, with each Council member and State Member of the United Nations playing a significant role. We must all continue to do everything we can to ensure full implementation across Syria. We look forward to continued reporting on the implementation of resolution 2401 (2018) to the Council through the regular Syria briefings and reports of the Secretary-General, as stipulated in the resolution.

Urgent attention must be focused on long-term humanitarian assistance, with the assurance of safe humanitarian access by the United Nations and other aid agencies, and evacuation of the wounded. We commend the sterling contribution of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the World Health Organization and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent for their provision of increased medical supplies and life-saving services, including surgical procedures. In that regard, we welcome the increase in humanitarian convoys gaining access to besieged areas in Syria in March, compared to previous months.

It is necessary to take note of the worrisome humanitarian situation in Syria, as fighting in different parts of the country are causing massive displacement. We endorse the appeal of the United Nations to help stem the catastrophic situation for tens of thousands of people, from both eastern Ghouta and Afrin. We look forward to the next round of talks, to be held in mid-May in our capital, Astana, where the stepping up of efforts to ensure observance of the relevant agreements will be addressed.

We also believe that the dialogue between Under-Secretary-General Mark Lowcock and the Government of Syria should be ongoing. We reiterate that all obligations under international humanitarian law must be respected by all parties. A further United Nations needs-assessment mission to these troubled areas, similar to that which Under-Secretary-General Lowcock led recently, may be required very soon. The Syrian authorities must cooperate fully with the United Nations and relevant humanitarian organizations in

facilitating the unhindered provision of humanitarian assistance and thereby mitigating the suffering.

Lastly, we are of the view that the crisis in Syria can be resolved only through an inclusive and Syrian-led political process, based on the Geneva communiqué of 30 June 2012 (S/2012/522, annex), subsequent Security Council resolutions and relevant statements of the International Syria Support Group.

Mr. Meza-Cuadra (Peru) (*spoke in Spanish*): We appreciate the convening of this meeting and the briefing by Mr. Mark Lowcock, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, on the humanitarian situation in Syria. We also welcome your presence here today, Sir, in presiding over our meeting.

Peru deeply regrets that violence and human suffering continue to characterize the situation in Syria, 30 days after the humanitarian ceasefire demanded by the Council. Resolution 2401 (2018) remains in full force, and we consider that the Syrian Government and other actors with the capacity to influence developments on the ground are obliged to ensure its full implementation. The ceasefire should be immediate and enable unrestricted access to humanitarian assistance throughout Syrian territory. While there has been some limited progress in that regard, the delivery of humanitarian assistance must be continuous and unrestricted.

In view of the Council's responsibilities in line with international law and international humanitarian law, Peru will continue to advocate for the protection of civilians in all conflicts and humanitarian crises. An indeterminate number of Syrian citizens, including thousands of women and children, have been driven out of eastern Ghouta by the violence. We note with concern that the shelters in the vicinity of Damascus cannot cope and that they lack food, clean water and medical supplies. We must remember that international humanitarian law has mandatory provisions for the evacuation of civilians. It is also compulsory to take measures to safeguard private property from looting and destruction. Syrian citizens must be able to return to their homes and businesses when security conditions improve. We must also protect the majority of the remaining population in eastern Ghouta, who are particularly vulnerable to reprisals, forced recruitment and sexual violence.

We are also concerned about the humanitarian situation in Afrin, Idlib and Raqqa, among other areas of Syria. The responsibility to protect civilians cannot be conditional or subordinated to political or strategic interests. We highlight the efforts of the United Nations and other humanitarian agencies, such as the Red Cross and the Red Crescent, to assist people in such a difficult situation. They have our full support.

Given the intensification of violence in recent weeks and its devastating consequences for the population, we must once again reiterate how urgent it is to make progress towards achieving a political settlement on the basis of resolution 2254 (2015) and the Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex). In that regard, we hope that progress will soon be made in the establishment and composition of the constitutional committee agreed on in Sochi. All the Syrian parties, and especially the Government, must engage constructively in this.

Mr. Alemu (Ethiopia): We thank Under-Secretary-General Lowcock for his comprehensive briefing. We want to express our appreciation to the United Nations and humanitarian partners for their continued selfless and courageous service in providing assistance to all Syrians in difficult circumstances.

We remain concerned about the humanitarian crisis in all the areas of Syria where it is prevalent. As the Under-Secretary-General said, the Syrian war has entered its eighth year, bringing unspeakable suffering to the people of the country. The escalation of violence that we witnessed last month in eastern Ghouta and other parts of the country has been a source of extremely grave concern. According to the statement issued on 21 March by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, shelter, protection, water and sanitation remain the key priority humanitarian needs of the internally displaced. In that regard, we thank the United Nations and its humanitarian partners for providing much-needed assistance.

Alleviating the suffering of Syrians requires urgent and coordinated action on the part of all actors, while respecting the relevant resolutions of the Council, particularly resolution 2401 (2018). It was encouraging that the Council unanimously adopted resolution 2401 (2018), demanding a cessation of hostilities throughout Syria for at least 30 days so as to ensure the safe, unimpeded and sustained delivery of humanitarian aid and medical evacuations. In that regard, while much remains to be done to fully implement the resolution, compared to the previous month there has been positive

action, including aid delivery to some of the areas that are especially badly affected and difficult to reach. The conflict has also diminished in intensity in some areas, according to the report of the Secretary-General (S/2018/243).

However, this does not mean that the action taken has been sufficient. We therefore stress that it is vital to redouble our efforts to do everything possible to fully and comprehensively implement the resolution with a sense of urgency and enhanced political will. We believe that what the people of Syria need is a cessation of hostilities, along with protection and access to basic goods and services. All of those demands are contained and affirmed in resolution 2401 (2018). All Syrian parties should therefore respect and fully implement resolution 2401 (2018), and all States that have influence over the parties should try to bring the maximum pressure to bear on them, with the ultimate objective of helping to fully operationalize the resolution, which was adopted unanimously by the Council. In that regard, we hope that the Astana guarantors, Russia, Turkey and Iran, will play their role in implementing resolution 2401 (2018), strengthening the ceasefire arrangements and improving humanitarian conditions, as stated in their final statement of 16 March.

In addition, while we acknowledge that the United Nations and its humanitarian partners have been able to reach millions of Syrians using all modes of aid delivery, the fact remains that humanitarian access, particularly inter-agency convoys, remains a critical challenge. In that connection, it is absolutely vital to ensure safe, sustained and need-based humanitarian access so that life-saving aid can reach all Syrians in need.

Let me conclude by reaffirming that only a comprehensive political dialogue, under the auspices of the United Nations, can ultimately end the humanitarian tragedy in Syria. We reiterate our position that the only solution to the Syrian crisis is a political solution based on resolution 2254 (2015). We support the continued efforts of the Special Envoy and encourage all Syrian parties to engage with him constructively and meaningfully in order to revitalize the Geneva intra-Syrian talks and support the establishment of a constitutional committee, in line with the outcome of the Sochi congress. We fully concur with the Secretary-General, who states, in his report of 20 March, "Political efforts to bring the war to an end must be accorded priority and redoubled by all parties to the conflict." (*S/2018/243, para. 48*)

While the primary responsibility for resolving the conflict lies with the Syrians themselves — a principle that is firmly embedded in resolution 2254 (2015) — the Council also has an important role to play in supporting the efforts in a spirit of unity, which we believe can have a positive impact on the ground in alleviating the suffering of all Syrians. That may be a tall order, in the light of the fragmentation that Ambassador Delattre mentioned earlier. However, the effort must be made.

Mr. Inchauste Jordán (Plurinational State of Bolivia) (*spoke in Spanish*): We welcome your presence, Sir, and the fact that you are presiding over the work of the Security Council today. We would also like to thank Mr. Mark Lowcock, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, for his briefing. We support him in the difficult work with which he is entrusted.

We must once again express our regret that this conflict has continued for eight years and that we are still witnessing the ongoing sieges and violence being endured by the Syrian people, particularly women and children. In addition to living with the psychological consequences of the situation, they urgently need humanitarian assistance. We unequivocally condemn the ongoing bombardment of civilian infrastructure such as hospitals and schools, and the military activities in residential areas in the cities of Damascus, Afrin and Idlib, as well as in eastern Ghouta. They have only led to more civilians being killed, wounded and displaced. According to the most recent report of the Secretary General (S/2018/243), between December and February alone, there were 385,000 internally displaced persons and 2.3 million people living in besieged and hard-to-reach areas.

We regret that so far there are still obstacles preventing the full implementation of resolution 2401 (2018). We call on all parties involved to make every effort to ensure the effective implementation of the resolution throughout Syria in order to facilitate the safe, sustained and unhindered delivery of humanitarian aid and services, as well as to enable the medical evacuation of those who are seriously ill or injured. In addition, according to the same report, since October 2017, 86,000 civilians have returned to the city of Raqqa, of whom 20,000 arrived in February alone. Regrettably, 130 civilians have died and 658 have been seriously injured by explosive remnants of war and anti-personnel mines. In that regard, we would like to highlight the visit by the United Nations mission to Raqqa last week. We reiterate that the work of clearing

anti-personnel mines and explosive remnants of war is crucial to facilitating the safe return of the displaced.

While it does not reflect what has gone on throughout Syrian territory, it is important to highlight the recent delivery of humanitarian aid through convoys, of which the first, on 5 March, was to Douma in eastern Ghouta, bringing food for more than 27,000 people. We also believe that cross-border assistance is an important part of the response to the situation, and we highlight the food assistance to 2 million people and the dispatch by the United Nations to areas of northern and southern Syria of 449 trucks carrying aid for 1 million people.

We welcome the efforts of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, all the humanitarian agencies concerned and the Russian Federation that have enabled humanitarian assistance to be delivered to various populations, in particular in eastern Ghouta, which three convoys recently entered. We call for that assistance to continue as safely as possible. In that regard, we believe it is important to strengthen the dialogue and coordination among the humanitarian agencies, the United Nations and the Syrian Government in order to facilitate the entry of convoys and humanitarian aid workers, as well as the safe and dignified return of refugees and internally displaced persons. We emphasize the dangerous work of the personnel of the various agencies and humanitarian assistance bodies, whose staff risk their own lives in carrying out their dangerous work on the ground. We therefore reiterate the importance of full respect for international humanitarian law and international human rights law.

We want to take this opportunity to reiterate how important it is to build on the political momentum following the commitments made at the Syrian National Dialogue Congress in Sochi. That should be the channel for reinforcing the Geneva process, led by the United Nations in the context of resolution 2254 (2015). We hope for the speedy implementation of the Sochi outcome and, as a result, the establishment of a constitutional committee that can facilitate a viable political transition. In that regard, we support the results of the latest Astana meeting, which enabled the agreements establishing de-escalation zones to be strengthened. We hope they will be reflected on the ground so as to reduce the violence and meet the urgent humanitarian needs. We condemn any attempt to foment fragmentation or sectarianism in Syria and believe that it is the Syrian people who must freely decide their future and their political leadership in the context of their sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Finally, we reiterate that the only way to resolve the conflict is through an inclusive, negotiated and agreed political process, led by and for the Syrian people, and aimed at achieving sustainable peace on their territory without foreign pressure of any kind.

Mr. Nebenzia (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We would like to welcome you as you preside over the Council today, Sir. We also welcome Ms. Karen Pierce, Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom, who is now here with us. We thank Mr. Lowcock for his briefing.

The difficult humanitarian situation continues in a number of areas in Syria. The Russian Federation has been taking active steps to normalize things, including within the framework of the implementation of resolution 2401 (2018). While some here may not like it, it is a fact that we are the only ones who have been making concrete efforts to implement resolution 2401 (2018). Since we first established humanitarian pauses, with the assistance of the Russian Centre for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides in the Syrian Arab Republic, and the participation and oversight of the United Nations and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, nearly 121,000 people have been evacuated, on a strictly voluntarily basis — let me stress that — from eastern Ghouta. Many of them have talked about how difficult it has been for them to live under the repressive regime established by the armed group militants. Civilians continue to flee eastern Ghouta through the Muhayam-Al-Wafedin humanitarian corridor. There is real-time video of this running on the Russian Defence Ministry's official website. In just the past few days more than 520 civilians have left Douma. Russian agencies have organized the distribution to them of hot food, food kits and individual food rations, as well as bottled drinking water. Yesterday alone, Russian military doctors treated 111 civilians, including 42 children.

At the same time, the Russian Centre for Reconciliation continues to organize the return of residents of Saqba and Kafr Batna. On 24 March, as a result of an agreement reached by the Centre with leaders of illegal armed groups, another checkpoint was opened for fighters and their family members to leave from Harasta, Arbin, Zamalka, Ain Terma and Jobar. In the past few days, militias from the Ahrar Al-Sham

and Faylak Al-Rahman groups and their relatives have been evacuated along the corridor and bused to Idlib governorate. In three days, more than 13,000 people were evacuated from Arbin alone. However, many have decided to remain, taking advantage of the presidential amnesty. Incidentally, there have been active efforts to plant stories about detentions and torture and possibly even executions. They are lies. The Syrian police are ensuring that these operations are safe, under the oversight of specialists from the Russian Centre for Reconciliation and representatives of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent. Yesterday 26 Syrian soldiers and civilians who had been taken prisoner by Faylak Al-Rahman were freed. In our view, those facts clearly attest to the difficulty and extent of the work being done by the Russian specialists on the ground, in communication with the Syrian authorities and the leaders of the armed groups. There are some members of the Security Council who prefer wasting their time on inflammatory speeches and letters making groundless claims about our country, probably to conceal their own unwillingness to do anything constructive to implement resolution 2401 (2018) in cooperation with the groups they sponsor.

At the same time, yesterday the fighters from Jaysh Al-Islam who remain in Douma detonated four mines yesterday in several districts in Damascus. Six civilians died and another six were wounded. Al-Mazraa, a residential neighbourhood in the capital was shelled earlier. As a result of mine explosions around the Al-Fayhaa sports complex, a 12-year-old boy died and seven children were injured. Hundreds of people have died from mine explosions in Damascus overall. This is apparently the message that the militants are sending every day about the willingness to implement the ceasefire that they loudly proclaimed in their famous letter to the Secretary-General.

I want to again point out the importance of clarifying the data used in the Secretary-General's report (S/2018/138), including on possible attacks on civilian infrastructure and the victims of such attacks. Where does that information come from? The February report has a footnote that mentions various United Nations agencies and departments of the Secretariat. The main source cited is the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, which does not have a staff presence on the ground. The big question, and what we are trying to get to the bottom of, is who is providing the United Nations staff with this kind of information? Is it the anti-Government groups and terrorist accomplices like the White Helmets? But they are interested parties. So why is there only a sprinkling of the information provided by the Syrian authorities?

We call on the United Nations, humanitarian organizations and States to deliver urgent assistance to help the people who are evacuating eastern Ghouta. It is also essential to strengthen the United Nations presence around the humanitarian corridors. The Syrians need immediate assistance with the infrastructure reconstruction that the Syrian Government has begun in the liberated residential areas of eastern Ghouta. We would like to ask Mr. Lowcock to oversee that issue personally.

We also hope that as soon as possible the coalition will create the conditions and provide the necessary security guarantees enabling a United Nations assessment mission to be sent to Raqqa and humanitarian convoys to the Rukban camp. The Syrian authorities gave their official consent to this some time ago, as Mark Lowcock confirmed today. We should note that we were shocked by the recent reports that more than 2,000 civilians may have died during the coalition forces' assault on Raqqa. Let me ask it once again — where were the weeping and wailing and calls for humanitarian aid then? We have noted the statistics in the Secretary-General's report on the numbers of people who have returned to Raqqa, but we would like to see similar information on other parts of Syria and the country as a whole. How many people are returning to their permanent homes? We would like to propose to the United Nations representatives that they designate the areas where those indicators are the highest as a priority for the delivery of humanitarian assistance and monitor how effectively it is being implemented.

We also think it would be appropriate to include information on reconstruction assistance in the reports. Resolution 2401 (2018) stipulates that Syrian districts, including those that have been liberated from terrorists, need support in restoring normal functioning and stability. One of the key areas in that regard is mine clearance. We get the feeling that external donors are losing interest in delivering assistance to residents in areas under Syrian Government control. We are seeing signals from some capitals that only opposition-held enclaves should be helped. Such double standards go completely against the core principles of neutrality and impartial humanitarian assistance. We hope that we are wrong about this and that Mr. Lowcock will refute the

possibility of such a trend. But if our suspicions are borne out, how does the United Nations intend to deal with the issue? Just the other day a meeting of senior officials was held in Oslo under the auspices of the United Nations and the European Union to address the humanitarian situation in Syria. No representatives of the Syrian authorities were invited. How does Mr. Lowcock view the prospect of another assessment of the humanitarian situation in Syria without the participation of its official representatives? Does he consider that a productive format? That is a very urgent question considering that the forthcoming second donor conference is scheduled for the end of April in Brussels.

I would also like to ask Mr. Lowcock what is known at the United Nations about the facts of sexual services being provided in exchange for humanitarian assistance in the context of cross-border operations. There is information about that in the November report of the United Nations Population Fund, and the BBC did a journalistic investigation of the issue. If this issue is known about, why is it avoided in the Secretary-General's reports? And if it is not known about, it should be investigated.

We hope that in close cooperation with the Syrian authorities and consideration of their views, the United Nations will agree on an emergency humanitarian response plan for this year as soon as possible, with an emphasis on the delivery of assistance to liberated areas.

Ms. Wronecka (Poland): I would like to welcome you here today, Sir, and to commend the presidency's leadership. I would also like to thank Under-Secretary-General Mark Lowcock for his comprehensive but once again alarming update.

Like many around this table, we share a sense of urgency on this issue, especially following the adoption of resolution 2401 (2018), which we adopted unanimously a month ago. Unfortunately, we have to recognize that it has not been implemented in the first 30 days since its adoption. We are meeting again when there has been no substantial change on the ground and the fighting is far from over. The military offensive in Syria continues and the human suffering is growing as a result. Any action, even against terrorists, cannot justify attacks on innocent civilians and civilian infrastructure, including health facilities. That must stop, and the parties to the conflict must strictly comply with their obligations under international humanitarian law. Accountability for serious violations is a requirement under international law and central to achieving sustainable peace in Syria.

As indicated in the last report of the United Nations-mandated Commission of Inquiry, there is a need for the international community to take a broader view of accountability and to take urgent steps to ensure that the needs of Syrian conflict victims for justice and accountability are met both immediately and in the long term. We call upon all parties to alleviate the suffering of the civilians, including children, by granting them free and safe access to humanitarian assistance, including voluntary medical evacuation, which should be strictly overseen by the United Nations and the implementing partners in order to ensure the voluntary character of the process.

While discussing evacuations, let me underline that people must have the right to return and to a safe location for settlement. Any evacuation negotiations should also include civilians. Humanitarian aid convoys to eastern Ghouta must continue for those who choose to stay.

We would like to stress that all actors should use their full influence to immediately improve conditions on the ground. We urgently call for the cessation of hostilities in the whole of Syria. Attacks against civilians, civilian property and medical facilities must stop in order to alleviate the humanitarian suffering of the Syrian people.

Some small positive steps have taken place, such as a larger number of humanitarian convoys reaching the besieged areas in March, especially when compared to previous months, when humanitarian access was almost completely blocked. That improvement shows that it is possible to make progress, although much more is needed. In that context, we call on Russia, Iran and Turkey — as the European Union did, and as the High Representatives did through their respective ministers after the Foreign Affairs Council of the European Union in February — to fulfil their obligations and responsibilities as Astana guarantors.

It is also important to note that the cessation of hostilities may also provide a chance for the peace talks under the auspices of the United Nations in Geneva to gain momentum so that a political solution may finally be reached. Once again, let me underline that we should seek to reach an intra-Syrian framework political agreement, in line with Council resolution 2254 (2015). In that connection, we strongly believe that the conclusions of the Congress of Syrian

National Dialogue in Sochi could and should be used to advance the Geneva process, especially with regard to the creation of a constitutional committee by United Nations Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura.

In conclusion, let me stress the necessity of maintaining the unity of the Council on the question of the full implementation of the humanitarian resolution across Syria. The civilian population of Syria has already suffered too much. The adoption of the resolution was just the beginning of the process. We call on all with influence on the ground to take the necessary steps to ensure that the fighting stops, the Syrian people are protected and, finally, our joint humanitarian access and necessary medical evacuations continue.

Mr. Ndong Mba (Equatorial Guinea) (*spoke in Spanish*): We welcome Mr. Stef Blok, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, to New York. We take this opportunity to congratulate him for the commendable presidency of the Netherlands during the month of March.

The Republic of Equatorial Guinea is grateful for the holding of this informative meeting, which enables us to once again assess humanitarian resolution 2401 (2018), which we approved one month ago. We thank Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Mark Lowcock, who, as he always does, has just given us a very informative and detailed briefing on the developments on the ground in Syria.

The 30-day ceasefire throughout Syria, established under resolution 2401 (2018) in order to carry out humanitarian operations, has expired. Despite the diplomatic efforts of the United Nations team in Syria, violence has increased in eastern Ghouta, in Damascus, in Idlib and in Afrin, where there is an ongoing Turkish military offensive. Daily air strikes and bombardments have increased, including in residential areas, among Government forces, opposition forces and non-State armed groups, making it difficult to ensure the protection of all civilians and the immediate, secure and sustained provision of humanitarian aid. That excessive resurgence of violence, orchestrated by the various parties, only serves to exacerbate and aggravate the already grim humanitarian situation in those conflict zones.

As we have reiterated, the solution to the humanitarian crisis in Syria is tightly linked with a ceasefire. The prolongation of the conflict can only further aggravate the tragic humanitarian situation, which in turn creates greater instability and negatively affects neighbouring countries that take in the millions of refugees fleeing the war.

As the Secretary-General underlines in his 20 March report:

> "Our common objective" — and one of high priority — "should be to alleviate and end the suffering of the Syrian people. What the Syrian people need immediately has been made abundantly clear and affirmed in resolution 2401 (2018). Civilians need a cessation of hostilities, protection, access to basic goods and services" — and access to humanitarian and sanitary assistance — "and an end to sieges." (*S/2018/243, para. 48*)

All parties involved in the Syrian crisis must accept that none of them can achieve a military victory. Government forces, opposition forces and armed groups must accept that no matter how much death and destruction they cause in their country, there will be no victor but rather one single loser — the Syrian people. Similarly, national parties and international partners that have significant political and geostrategic interests and that have the capacity to exercise their influence on their respective allies must redouble their efforts and political commitments in order to bring sustainable peace and stability to the country. Any party that insists on political red lines that block the necessary commitments must also consider the setback caused by the loss of innocent human lives.

It is evident that the Council has not entirely reached its goal by unanimously adopting resolution 2401 (2018). The Republic of Equatorial Guinea will support any humanitarian initiative that seeks to definitively put an end to the suffering of the Syrian people.

In conclusion, I renew the tribute of the Republic of Equatorial Guinea to Mr. Lowcock and to the entire humanitarian team of the United Nations for their noble and tireless work in Syria to provide relief to the Syrian people living through a humanitarian catastrophe.

Mr. Dah (Côte d'Ivoire) (*spoke in French*): Like others, my delegation would like to welcome Mr. Stef Blok to New York and to congratulate him on the holding of the current meeting in the Security Council. My delegation also wishes to thank Mr. Mark Lowcock, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, for his informative briefing on the humanitarian situation in Syria.

As we are all aware, the war in Syria has unleashed one of the most serious humanitarian crises in recent history and continues to have a devastating impact on the Syrian people. My country remains particularly concerned about the attacks and bombings, including those against hospitals and civilian infrastructure, that continue to punctuate the daily lives of people subjected to forced displacement in the areas of Afrin, Idlib and eastern Ghouta. Côte d'Ivoire condemns those actions and calls on the parties to take the steps necessary to protect people, civilian infrastructure and humanitarian personnel.

More than a month after its unanimous adoption by members of the Security Council, resolution 2401 (2018), on which so much hope was pinned, has fallen woefully short of our expectations, much to our regret. The fact is that the demand for an immediate cessation of hostilities to allow safe and unhindered delivery of humanitarian aid and related services, as well as medical evacuation of the seriously ill and wounded, in accordance with relevant international humanitarian law, has still not been adhered to, despite our joint efforts.

The ongoing fighting has forced hundreds of thousands of civilians to flee to camps and makeshift shelters where living conditions are extremely difficult. Côte d'Ivoire calls once again for the effective implementation of resolution 2401 (2018) with a view to resuming the delivery of humanitarian aid, including medical evacuations from besieged areas and camps for internally displaced persons, in order to ease the suffering of people in distress. We urge the Council to overcome its differences and to demonstrate unity in order to ensure the effective implementation of the resolution, which is more relevant than ever.

My delegation reiterates its belief that the humanitarian situation will not improve unless significant progress is made at the political level, as the two issues are closely linked. We therefore encourage the parties to prioritize political dialogue and resume peace talks in the framework of the Geneva process, in accordance with the road map established by resolution 2254 (2015).

Mr. Wu Haitao (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): I thank Under-Secretary-General Lowcock for his briefing. China commends the active efforts of the relevant United Nations agencies to alleviate the humanitarian situation in some areas of Syria.

The conflict in Syria is in its eighth year and has caused terrible suffering for the people of Syria. The humanitarian situation in parts of the country has recently deteriorated. China calls on all parties in Syria to put its country's future and destiny, as well as its people's safety, security and well-being first, cease hostilities and violence without delay, resolve their differences through dialogue and consultation and ease the humanitarian situation in Syria as soon as possible.

United Nations humanitarian convoys have now gained access to eastern Ghouta in order to deliver aid supplies to the people there. China welcomes Russia's establishment of temporary truces in eastern Ghouta, opening up a humanitarian corridor for Syrian civilians. As a result of the efforts of the parties concerned, some ceasefire agreements have been reached and a large number of civilians evacuated through the corridor. In the circumstances, it is important to continue to promote the implementation of resolution 2401 (2018) so as to alleviate the humanitarian situation in areas such as eastern Ghouta.

China welcomes the meeting between Foreign Ministers held by Russia, Turkey and Iran in Astana, and commends Kazakhstan for hosting the meeting. We hope that the upcoming meeting of the Heads of State of the three countries and the next round of the Astana dialogue will contribute positively to restoring the ceasefire momentum in Syria and supporting the Geneva talks.

The international community should continue to support the role of the United Nations as the main mediator, and back Special Envoy de Mistura's diplomatic efforts to relaunch the Syrian political process.

Syria's sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity must be respected, and all Syrian parties must be encouraged to reach a political solution to the Syrian issue, based on the principle of the Syrian-led and Syrian-owned peace process, and in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015), with a view to fundamentally easing the humanitarian situation in Syria and continuing to advance the counter-terrorism agenda, as mandated by the Council's resolutions. The Council should remain united on the Syrian issue and speak with one voice. China stands ready to work with the international community and to contribute actively and constructively to a political settlement of the Syrian issue.

Mr. Orrenius Skau (Sweden): As the representative of Kuwait has already delivered a joint statement on our behalf, I will make my remarks very brief.

One month ago, the Council adopted resolution 2401 (2018) by consensus, in response to the deafening calls for action to address the horrific humanitarian situation in Syria. Today we have heard around this table a continued commitment to moving forward with the implementation of that important resolution. I wanted to speak last in order to identify some points of convergence. From the discussion today, I believe that there are a number of critical areas where there is broad agreement within the Council.

First, we all share a deep disappointment and sense of dissatisfaction and frustration with the lack of implementation. While a limited increase in access for humanitarian convoys shows that progress is possible, much more is needed. The resolution remains in force and all parties remain obliged to comply.

Secondly, we have heard a common concern about the continuing hostilities throughout the country, particularly the ongoing military offensive in eastern Ghouta. Those who leave the area should do so voluntarily, with the right to return and a choice of safe places to go to. At the same time, humanitarian aid convoys must continue to support those who choose to remain.

Thirdly, we agree that efforts to strengthen the protection of civilians must be stepped up by the United Nations and its partners, both inside eastern Ghouta and for those leaving and in the collective shelters. I want to emphasize that preventing sexual and gender-based violence should be an integral part of those efforts. We condemn the attacks in February that affected health facilities.

Many colleagues also reiterated today that resolution 2401 (2018) applies across the whole of the country. I just wanted to mention our concern about the Turkish operation in Afrin and the statements that Turkey has made about expanding its military operations in the north, beyond Afrin. We are also concerned about the protection of civilians fleeing Afrin, as well as the difficult conditions for those remaining. We call on all relevant parties, especially Turkey, to ensure the protection of civilians and facilitate cross-border and cross-line humanitarian aid deliveries, as well as freedom of movement, for internally displaced persons.

The need for the full implementation of resolution 2401 (2018) remains as urgent today as when it was adopted. As Ambassador Alotaibi has said, we will spare no effort in making progress on the implementation of resolution 2401 (2018). We will continue to work actively and tirelessly to that end, be creative in considering possible further steps, and remain ready to reconvene the Council at any time should the situation warrant its renewed action. We are convinced that the unity of the Council, as difficult as it may be, is the only way to effectively make a real difference on the ground and alleviate the suffering of the Syrian people. For our part, even when terribly frustrated, we will never give up trying to achieve that change.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic.

Mr. Ja'afari (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): At the outset, I would like to convey the condolences of the Government and people of my country to my colleague on the Russian Federation delegation in the wake of the tragic incident that claimed children's lives in the commercial centre in Kemerovo.

A few minutes ago, I was checking the list of the States members of the Security Council and I realized that two — only two — of its 15 members have embassies in Damascus. That is why the statements made by the representatives of those two countries offered the most accurate description of the humanitarian situation in my country. They were able to provide an objective and fair assessment of the situation there.

In late 2016, right here in the Chamber (see S/PV.7834), we announced the good news to our people in Syria that the Syrian Government would liberate eastern Aleppo from armed terrorist groups, and as a Government, an army and a responsible State we have done just that. Today we announce to our people the good news that the time has come to liberate all of eastern Ghouta from these armed terrorist groups. We declare that we will liberate the Golan, Afrin, Raqqa, Idlib and the rest of our occupied territory because, as a State, we reject the presence on our territory of any illegal armed group or occupying Power, regardless of the excuses, just like all other States represented in the Council. Such victories would not have been possible if we had no just cause. They would not have been possible without the sacrifices made by the Syrian Arab Army, the support of our people and the support of our allies and friends.

Facts that have come to light recently with the liberation of eastern Ghouta from armed terrorist groups again prove what we have always told the Council since the first day of the global terrorist war waged by Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Israel, Turkey, the United States, the United Kingdom and France against my country. We said that the suffering of Syrians is the result of the practices of armed terrorist groups against civilians. The testimonies of the tens of thousands of our people leaving eastern Ghouta underscore that those groups have continued to deprive them of their freedom, destroy their livelihoods, disperse their families and prevent them from leaving to areas under State control in order to continue using them as human shields. They have seized control of humanitarian assistance in order to distribute it to their supporters or sell it to civilians at exorbitant prices. They have also targeted the safe corridors allocated by the Government with explosive bullets and mortar shelling, which has led to the death of dozens of people, including some Palestinian brethren.

We have borne witness to a state of hysteria in recent days and weeks in the Council as the Syrian Government has sought to exercise its sovereign right, combat terrorist groups and eliminate terrorists in Syria in order to restore security and stability to all Syrians and implement Council resolutions against terrorism. That state of hysteria proves that the States supporting those terrorist groups have never sought to end the suffering of Syrians. They have sought only to perpetuate and prolong their suffering in order to blackmail the Syrian Government, at the political and humanitarian levels, and save terrorists from their certain deaths. I would like to assure the supporters of terrorism, some of whom are present in this Chamber, that the plan that they have promoted for the past seven years has failed. Their plan was to deny that the Islamist takfiri groups were terrorists and instead present them as moderate Syrian opposition. That plan has failed.

Eastern Ghouta has not fallen, as my colleague the representative of the United States stated. It was liberated in the same way we liberated eastern Aleppo. It is terrorism that has fallen in eastern Ghouta, not civilians. As the representative of the United States said, today should be a day of shame for the supporters and sponsors of terrorism and terrorist groups. They have supported those terrorist groups for years in order to topple the Syrian Government by force in favour of Islamist takfiri groups. Such actions have led to considerable suffering among the Syrian people, and I have proof of it. Two days ago, at the Senate Armed Forces Committee, led by Senator Lindsey Graham, the Chief of Central Command, General Joseph Votel, stated that "the change of the Government in Syria by force in favour a number of Islamist opposition groups has failed".

The Security Council has to date held 49 formal meetings to discuss the so-called humanitarian situation in Syria and a number of informal emergency and Arria Formula meetings. The Council has read reports and heard briefings that were replete with falsehoods that senior officials of the United Nations sought to present in order to serve the policies of some influential Western countries that are members of the Council and to pressure the Syrian Government. Such reports and briefings were completely devoid of professionalism and objectivity. They have failed to take note of the attacks on the sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic, including the attacks by the international coalition, led by the United States, and those by the Turkish regime and the Israeli occupying force. Those same parties have also sought to provide all kinds of support to terrorist groups associated with Da'esh, the Al-Nusra Front and other militias fabricated in those countries.

After 49 reports and hundreds of meetings, briefings and thousands of working hours, some countries continue to refuse to recognize that the humanitarian crisis in Syria is the result of an external investment in terrorism and unilateral coercive measures. Forty-nine reports have been issued, and I say today that my words are falling on deaf ears. People from the Netherlands say that beautiful flowers have thorns. The Netherlands is famous for its flowers. Perhaps that saying reflects the situation on the ground.

Mr. Lowcock stated that the Kashkul was targeted by a missile but he did not specify its origin. He said there are eight shelters for those leaving eastern Ghouta. He did not mention the efforts of the Syrian Government to host the 150,000 civilians leaving eastern Ghouta. He does not know who manages those shelters. Perhaps aliens are taking care of the 150,000 civilians. Mr. Lowcock stated that the United Nations, its partners and the Syrian Red Crescent are helping people from Ghouta. He did not mention the Government at all. If the Government has no role to play, why ask it to help the Council? Why does the Council request its approval for the entry of humanitarian convoys? Mr. Lowcock stated that 153,000 people left Afrin and went to Tell

Rifaat because of military operations. Who forced 153,000 people to leave Afrin? Was it not Turkey that forced them to leave? Was it not the Turkish aggression against Afrin that forced these people to leave?

Mr. Lowcock mentioned the Syrian Government only once, saying that it approved the delivery of humanitarian assistance to the Rukban camp. He did not say that the United States was behind the obstacles preventing the deployment of the humanitarian convoy in question. The United States occupies the Rukban camp and the Tanf area. I will not go into detail now for the sake of time. I will not even go into the details of the forty-ninth report of the Secretary-General (S/2018/243). I will give only one example to prove that the report lacks objectivity and impartiality.

The report devotes nine paragraphs to the suffering of civilians in eastern Ghouta and the damage to the infrastructure there as a result of Government military operations, as the report claims — nine paragraphs. As for the situation of the 8 million civilians in Damascus, the targeting by terrorist groups of the capital with more than 2,500 missiles, the killing and injury of thousands, and the destruction of homes, hospitals and clinics, the report dedicates only one sentence to Damascus. The report says,

> "Attacks on residential neighbourhoods of Damascus also continued from eastern Ghouta, resulting in deaths, injuries and damage to civilian infrastructure." (*S/2018/243, para. 8*)

We hope that the United Nations will not adopt in eastern Ghouta the same approach that it has taken in previous situations by not providing support to the areas liberated or achieving reconciliation. We hope that the United Nations will adopt a new approach in line with the Charter and international law, based on full coordination and cooperation with the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic, which is the only party concerned with the protection and support of Syrians. We hope that the United Nations will not succumb to the dictates of certain influential Western countries in the Council that run counter to humanitarian action, the Charter and international law.

During the past week alone, the Syrian Ministry of Commerce has distributed 4,000 tons of food to civilians leaving eastern Ghouta. I am not sure about the sources mentioned by the representative of France, because France does not have an embassy in Damascus. So its sources of information cannot be credible.

In conclusion, the States sponsoring terrorism have instructed armed terrorist groups to use chemical weapons once again in Syria. I ask the Council to pay attention to this information. They asked them to fabricate evidence, as they have in the past, in order to accuse the Syrian Government. We sent this information to the President of the Security Council yesterday. According to that information, this theatrical act will be produced by the intelligence agencies of these countries, and the starring roles will be the White Helmets. The production will be directed by foreign media. This theatrical act will take place this time in the areas close to the separation line in the Syrian occupied Golan. Terrorist groups will use poison gas against civilians in Al-Harra. Afterwards, the injured will be moved to the hospitals of the Israeli enemy for treatment there. Council members can already imagine the testimony that will be offered by doctors of the Israeli occupation forces.

The information we submitted also refers to another theatrical act in the villages of Habit and Qalb Lawza in the suburbs of Idlib, where a number of satellite transmitters and foreign experts have been spotted. This time, the cast will include women and children from an internally displaced persons camp on the Syrian-Turkish border. Once again, I provide the Council with this serious information.

The President: There are no more names inscribed on the list of speakers. I now invite Council members to informal consultations to continue our discussion on the subject.

The meeting rose at 1.15 p.m.